My Aleppo: A Memoir of Syria

1996-1998

by

Ann Struthers

The Struthers Family
Cedar Rapids, IA

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Introduction

Eleanor Ann Struthers, Ph.D. (1930-2024), an author, scholar, teacher, wife, mother of four, grandmother and great grandmother, was an energetic and enthusiastic lover of life. Born and educated in Iowa, she lived most of her life there, completing degrees at Morningside College and the University of Iowa. During the second half of her teaching career, she offered courses in American and Middle Eastern Literature and in creative writing at Coe College in Cedar Rapids, IA. Though based in Iowa, with her husband, Melvin, she travelled widely in North America, Europe, Asia, and the Far and Middle East, twice teaching abroad in Syria and Sri Lanka. At Coe, we were colleagues and our families became close friends, which explains why it feels right in the *My Aleppo* volumes to use her preferred first name in the introduction.

In 1996-1998, Ann was a Fulbright Professor at the University of Aleppo, Syria, where she taught American Literature. Her work in Syria marked a turning point in her life. From that date, much of her scholarship and writing grew out of that experience.

When she died on 24 February 2024, she was engaged in drafting a memoir of the two years in Syria. In that text, Ann wanted to tell the story of her adventures, with husband Mel, teaching, residing, and traveling in Syria and the Middle East. She was working vigorously on this text until just a few days before her death. I began my work with a copy of the whole manuscript that she saved on her computer just three days before she died. She developed her memoir mainly over her final three years. During that time, she and I met almost weekly in her home, mainly to socialize, but we usually talked some about her ideas for the memoir and her sense of its progress. I believe that in her last year, the project began to overwhelm her. Her health was imperfect, and at the same time, she continued to develop new material and to try out ways to fit everything into an engaging narrative. What she left was rich in material, but clearly unfinished.

As her close friend for many years, I agreed with her children to attempt "completing" Ann's memoir as well as to consider what to do with the many unpublished poems that appear in *My Aleppo 1*. I have found working over the memoir a daunting task. I hesitated to make changes, wanting to preserve intact, as well as I could, the work she had done. But in its unfinished state, the text would not be accessible or attractive to most readers.

The result still is unfinished. I have worked mainly to cut repetition and organize the material into what seems to me a readable and reasonably attractive order. Of the people who have read the resulting text, Robert Marrs has offered professional commentary. His good advice was, essentially, that to make the memoir publishable in itself, it would need to become more like her poetry, much more concise. I have decided that such a revision would best be undertaken by someone better suited to that task than I, perhaps a professional editor.

Ann changed the names of her Syrian friends, to protect them, especially after the Syrian Civil War began in 2011, but I believe she correctly names her other characters, except for some American diplomatic personnel.

I wish that I knew the names of all the people with whom Ann shared her work and who gave her substantial help with the memoir. I know that she regularly consulted several members of her family. Among others, I can name Lisa Stroschine and Peggy Knott at Coe College. Of decisive aid to me was Linda Heller. She read most of this material, pointing out problems and correcting errors. Her sharp eyes and thoughtful reading significantly improved this collection.

Terry Heller, Coe College, 2026.

Memories of Aleppo (2024)

From the New World to Ancient Syria

I stood in the yard of our shore house in Spirit Lake, Iowa, waiting for the driver who was coming to take Mel and me to the Minneapolis airport for the first leg of our flight to Syria. There I would be a Fulbright Professor of American Literature at the University of Aleppo. I had grown up on a farm in this Western Iowa county that bordered Minnesota. I had graduated from two Iowa colleges. I was an Iowa person and so was my husband, Mel. Both of us were interested in far-away places, and we had traveled as widely as time and our finances permitted. We had been to France and the Netherlands several times, to England twice, to Italy, Greece and elsewhere in Europe. In the Middle East we had spent several weeks in Turkey visiting a former student and seeing the historical sites. Now I looked forward to teaching in another country and getting to know the students, the people and the places. I was also looking forward to adventures.

Every morning in our summers I had walked along the shores of Big Spirit Lake, and the lake in all its moods had become as precious to me as it was to Mel, who had grown up beside it. On the day of our departure, I looked out at the August lake. It was a windy day and the breeze out of the Northwest was picking up waves and leaving them on the beach, as if the lake were a book and the wind was turning the pages. I thought of Emily Dickinson's poem, sometimes titled "By the Sea."

I started early, took my dog,
and visited the sea.
The mermaids in the basement
Came out to look at me.

And frigates in the upper floor
Extended hempen hands
Presuming me to be a mouse
Aground upon the sand.

But no man moved me till the tide
Went past my simple shoe,
And past my apron and my belt
And past my bodice too.

And made as he would eat me up
As wholly as a dew
Upon a dandelion's sleeve —
And then I started too.

And he –he followed close behind:
I felt his silver heel
Upon my ankle — then my shoes
Would overflow with pearl.

Until we met the solid town,
No man he seemed to know.
And bowing with a mighty bow
At me the sea withdrew.

I wasn't Emily Dickinson, and I had no dog, and Spirit Lake was no ocean, but I shared her imaginative fascination with the ocean and her sense of its menace. I was about to cross her sea to a part of the world, mysterious and enticing, and very different from this Iowa landscape. I was starting early, and the lake's waves turned over another page.

Ann of Iowa

Awaiting our ride, I thought back on how I had come to this moment. How did a skinny farm kid in a tiny rural community come to be flying off to far away Syria to teach American Literature at the University of Aleppo? Surely the beginning was my early reading that fired in me a longing to know a wider world than that of the small Iowa farm where I was born.

I remembered as a child reading by moonlight about Roy Chapman Andrews's exploration in the deserts of China. I was not much interested in the dinosaur eggs he found nor in the China desert, but he stimulated my imagination with the romance of exploring faraway places. Before I read him, I had been corrupted by my fifth-grade geography with its black and white pictures of palm trees and camels and by the Sunday School paper I received each week, containing illustrations of Biblical life in the Middle East. A Sunday School teacher urged our class to construct a miniature of the kind of house Jesus lived in. Mother and Dad helped me and my sister wrap a cardboard box in brown paper and draw the lines for bricks. We didn't know what to do about the windows, but Dad brought home from town some transparent paper. None of us knew the houses in the Middle East in Jesus's time had no glass in their few windows or that such houses still could be seen in Syria.

In childhood on the farm, I traveled by reading. During the school year there were always class books, and when I finished them, there was the encyclopedia. During the summer Dad would allow me to take out only two books each week from the small public library in Terril. In a society whose finest accolade was "He's a good worker," and where everyone was judged on whether they were hard workers, I was a bad child.
Once I had a book in my hand, I couldn't wait to read it. I often read by moonlight, but Paula, my sister, only a year younger, hated reading. She would tell Mother, and Mother would make me quit and go to bed. And so I hid away to read by the moon.

In the summer, long hours of farm work filled our lives. It seemed to me all we did was work, but I didn't mind that so much as the isolation. We usually saw no one besides the immediate family all week long. For my parents, it was a life of constant toil, and at the end of the day, they were exhausted, too tired to converse with an inquisitive child.

Though Dad was adamant that women and girls shouldn't labor in the fields, on a subsistence family farm, there was plenty of work for everyone. Mother worked desperately hard, caring for six children, cooking three meals a day for the family and the hired man. The laundry was very difficult since we had no running water. Nor was there an indoor bathroom. Mother also kept a big garden, and canned vegetables and fruit for the winter. When we became able, Paula and I had to help Mother with all her tasks.

During the summers Paula and I had chores, taking care of the livestock while Dad and a hired man worked in the fields. Dad always fed a lot of hogs. He called them "the mortgage lifters," and it was our job to clean their troughs and then fill them again with a mash called slop. It was hard to like pigs. Their grunts were hoarse and insistent. Their table manners were awful, pushing each other away for a better place at the trough, their rubbery noses snuffling against our ankles. The cattle had better manners, but Dad raised white-face cattle that are notoriously aggressive, especially when they have calves. Paula and I learned that when an old cow put her head down and ran toward us, we should step to the side as bullfighters do, and then scramble for the fence. It takes a long time for a cow to turn around, so we stayed safe.

One of the delights of feeding the animals was climbing the ladder to the hay mow and tossing down forkfuls of hay. When we had a big pile below, we threw the pitchforks down to the side; then we leapt from the high second story into the pile of hay. We distributed the hay in the mangers for the horses. Until I was ten or eleven, Dad farmed with horses. He had a pair of Belgium draft horses, strawberry roans, named Shorty and Duke. They were almost exactly matched in strength, but once in a while Shorty got tired of pulling his half. Dad never beat the horses or any other animal. He instantly fired a hired man who hit Duke on the nose with his pitchfork handle. We all learned to protect the animals and take care of them.

Often when animals were born during cold or rainy weather, Dad would bring a newborn calf to the house to warm behind the kitchen stove. When it was lambing season, we often had several lambs warming there. Ewes are very particular about the smell of their offspring. If the baby lamb got too wet or muddy, the mother couldn't recognize him by his scent. One year we had seven lambs that had been rejected by their mothers. We children fed them cow's milk in Coca Cola bottles with a special nipple bought at the drug store. Of course the lambs became pets and followed us around. Lambs are gentle creatures and came when we called them. They are energetic, too, like small children. On bright sunny days they ran and jumped almost clicking their back heels together. When the lambs were grown and sold, Dad bought savings bonds with the money for each of us. I still think there is nothing so beautiful as white lambs on a green pasture.

Because there were always younger siblings to care for while my mother accomplished all the hard work of canning, preserving, cooking, doing the laundry, and taking care of her chickens, Paula and I were the obvious candidates for this job. Since the younger children cried when Paula was delegated to watch them, that task became mine. I didn't enjoy it as I should have, because I was so hungry for adult conversation, to talk about ideas and what I was reading. I had only books to feed my spirit, and summers on the farm were hard for me. Life on the farm was good in many ways, but too confining.

When I was ready and eager to go to college, getting there proved to be a struggle. My parents had "lost" a farm during the depression and were always afraid there wouldn't be enough money. How would they be able to send six children to college, especially the daughters? Fortunately, our Methodist pastor intervened and took me to Morningside College in Sioux City. There he introduced me to Dr. Roadman, the president of the college, who said the college girl who had worked for them for her room and board had graduated, and that he and Mrs. Roadman were looking for her replacement. He sent me to their home to be interviewed by Mrs. Roadman. She was impressed by my farm background and hired me. I was supposed to work twenty-seven hours a week. Now Dad would have to pay only my tuition.

So my adult life with books began. I could read as late as I pleased. I was entranced by my

Shakespeare class. I loved history and worried about science, but studied hard, worked hard — learned to dance by dancing. The Roadmans were very good to me, treating me like a daughter. During the first summer, I fell in love with a young man from Spirit Lake who was working his way through college in Washington, D. C. After I graduated and he returned from his army service, we were married, and Mel finished his law degree. We moved back to Iowa and had four children. When the youngest one was in school full time, I went back to college, commuting to the University of Iowa where I earned my Master's and Ph.D. degrees. I taught briefly at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, then at the University of Northern Iowa in Waterloo, and finally at Coe College, a small liberal arts school in Cedar Rapids. This was my route to Syria and my Fulbright adventure.

Mel, too, was an Iowan. He grew up in Spirit Lake, the county seat of Dickinson County, population about 2,000 people, with several lakes on all sides. This seemed to me a big town. Mel's little house stood in sight of Big Spirit Lake, on the north side of town. Having grown up on the lake, Mel couldn't remember when he didn't know how to swim. His father had a small workshop behind their home where he sharpened lawn mower blades, welded broken small farm equipment, and made ornamental railings. Later he was a machinist for the local fishing tackle manufacturer. His mother worked in a retail store on Main Street. When she retired, she became the person on duty at the Spirit Lake Museum.

Mel's intellectual ability was recognized early. While both of us were in high school, he was elected President of the Sub-District Methodist Youth Fellowship. That is where I first met him. The church was always important to Mel, although I was not as dedicated. When he was in high school, he found an ad for positions with the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington, D.C, and he applied. After graduation, while awaiting a reply, he went to work, along with his friend Austin, for the Dickinson County Engineer. They were surveyors for a few months before Mel accepted an offer from the FBI.

In Washington, he worked by day for the FBI, and by night he took classes at George Washington University, working slowly toward his college degree. He planned eventually to get a law degree.

Early in the summer of my sophomore college year, I visited my parents before I began my job as a summer nanny in New York. On Saturday night I went to Arnolds Park's Dreamland Roller Rink on a date. Mel was home, too, visiting his parents, and he also was skating that night. We recognized each other, and he asked me for a skate. As we went round and round, he asked if he could take me home. I couldn't do that because I was there on a date with an old boyfriend. When I turned him down, he asked if he could take me on a picnic the following day. We had a good picnic at Gull Point and we talked and talked and went swimming, even though I couldn't swim.

When I returned from the picnic, I told my sister, Paula, about it, and I added, "He's the kind of man I want to marry."

"You want to marry him?"
I had to be careful about what I said to Paula, because when we were in high school, I suspected that she tried to steal my boyfriends. "No," I said, "only that kind of man." After that Mel and I wrote to each other regularly, sometimes every day.

The Korean War interposed itself into Mel's plans. Because he worked for the FBI, he could have had a deferment, but he decided that he should let the draft board in Dickinson County know that he was ready to go. He was drafted and sent to an army school for Morse Code communication. While the war was in the Far East, the western world also was threatened by the Russian blockade of Berlin. Half of Mel's division was sent to Korea, but he was in the lucky half that went to Germany.

Meanwhile, I finished college, and when he came home, we were married. He went back to the university in Washington and worked part time for the Tennessee Valley Authority while I taught seventh-grade in nearby Silver Spring, Maryland. After law school, he worked briefly for the small Business Administration as an investigator, and when we moved to Cedar Rapids, he set up the first small business loan association in the state.

Our marriage was a good one. Mel was so responsible, helpful, and kind. He was always a lot of fun and loved to travel and to talk about new ideas. Most of all, he loved talking to people. He brought many interesting people into our lives, because he could converse with anyone and everyone. We both were glad to have left behind our farm and small town childhoods, though we remained connected by summering in Spirit Lake. Together we had found the life of the mind and a gregarious life in a small Iowa city, but still, we yearned to expand our experience. We were naïfs, curious and open to the possibilities of parts of the wide world we had not yet seen.

On that final morning before leaving Spirit Lake, I believed I was ready for what was ahead. Certainly I was ready to travel. I had my suitcase packed and my briefcase loaded. I had been awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to teach at the University of Aleppo in Syria. I had been to Syria for a few weeks once before on a Malone Fellowship, and I had gone to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor to get additional help when

I was preparing to teach Arabic and Middle Eastern Literature in translation at Coe College. At that time there were few novels about the Middle East that had been translated into English, but to prepare my course I read every one I could find. I was delighted by the *Cairo Trilogy* of Naguib Mahfouz (1911-2006) although it was set in Egypt, not Syria. I came to wish I could have read him in Arabic. Not speaking the language would prevent me from really settling into the society. If only I were a faster and better language learner!

As Mel came down the walk after locking our door, I saw he was wearing a white shirt and red suspenders. No suit, no necktie, far different from the suit and tie he had to wear every day to his law office. Mel had no interest in style and cared nothing for the way he looked. Once when we were in Spirit Lake at his mother's house, and she was entertaining a friend, Mel walked past their tea table wearing a wildly printed pajama top and an old pair of overalls that had belonged to his father. He was in the process of fixing some small things around her house and yard. The friend asked Mel's mother, "Is that your lawyer son?" Mel's mother sighed and replied, "Yes." I asked him if he would please put a suit jacket over those suspenders, but it was too late, because our driver now appeared. My turn to sigh.

I took one last look at the old farmhouse we worked so hard to restore, and the lake we both loved so much. Yesterday Mel had put our two little sailboats safely in the garage. Thieves would not stand a chance. And we were off.

Mel hadn't had as much time to think about our trip as I had, because when I applied for this Fulbright appointment, I hadn't told him. In the past when I applied for any of the academic possibilities available to professors, I told him, but not this time. He was so supportive and so proud of me, that he would always tell people about my applications, assuming I would always be chosen. If this major application failed, I didn't want to be both disappointed and embarrassed.

In Damascus

From Minneapolis we flew to Amsterdam where we had to get another flight to Damascus, Syria, because no U.S. airlines flew into that ancient city.

In Damascus, after we began wheeling our heavy bags through the Customs line, a diminutive woman arrived from the Embassy. She took charge of our heavy suitcases and zipped us through. This was our introduction to Gillian, who would be our liaison with the American Embassy. She was a diplomat, with an office at the American Center, a separate building in the embassy compound. (The American Embassy in Damascus, including the American Center, has been closed for regular consular services since 2012.) Gillian dropped us off in downtown Damascus, at a very modest hotel where the Junior Fulbrights also were staying. These were students who had completed their bachelor's degrees, some working on Master's or Ph.Ds. As we got to know them, we discovered all of this year's selection had only completed their Bachelor's degrees. They had been selected by Gillian's predecessor at the American Center, since Syria did not have a local Fulbright Committee. Most were from Muslim families in the United States, and they were going to learn Arabic by attending a Muslim madrasa, where Arabic was taught solely by reciting and memorizing the Quran, the Muslim Holy Book. At first, I was put off by the use of my American tax dollars to study a religion, especially one that was often at odds with American foreign policy. On the other hand, as an educator, I was greatly in favor of Americans learning foreign languages, especially those of countries where in the past American officials often included no speakers of the local language. I had not made much progress in Arabic with the tapes and book I bought. The language was very difficult, and writing it was even more difficult. Perhaps the madrassa method was not such a bad idea.

Damascus had been central to the Arab world for centuries, and, for just as long, a place of mystery and intrigue. I had imagined the city in terms of my childhood Sunday School papers, a city of one-story mud-brick houses. In 1996, we arrived in the Syrian capital with its many large hotels and thousands of two or three story apartment houses, its skyline punctuated by many graceful minarets. Unreliable government figures claimed a population of four million, but Mel estimated there must be at least six million. Later he revised his guess to eight million.

We spent our first mornings in orientation meetings, discussing local manners, social mores, and in the afternoons the diplomats took us on field trips to the city's historic sites, explaining their importance.

Damascenes claimed their city was the longest continuously settled city in the world, dating back 9000 years. It was important in religious history as well as political history. We walked on the street called Straight (which has an elbow bend) mentioned in St. Paul's letters. We were impressed by the famous Umayyad Mosque, a walled complex of buildings, one of the most important mosques in the world. Inside, several of the high walls were faced with lovely ceramic tiles depicting trees, lush foliage, and water. I thought of the Arab saying, "Arabs do not love the desert; they love the oasis." Here in beautiful shades of green was the perfect oasis, a vision of Paradise. The diplomats also told us about Mohammed (the

founder of Islam) and his reaction on seeing the valley that held ancient Damascus when he was a young man on a trading trip for his uncle's company. He looked down at the verdant oasis and decided it was so beautiful that if he ever went down into it, he would be tempted to stay forever. In the courtyard of the mosque complex was a large fountain, where several men were dipping in their hands and arms, splashing the water over their heads, and a few washing their feet, also. I later learned that before Muslims prayed, they were supposed to wash their hands, head and feet.

To enter the Grand Mosque within the compound, women were required to wear the *abayah*, the large, all-encompassing garment that covered them from head to ankles. The diplomats asked us women, earlier, to bring a scarf to cover our hair, which was also required. A man at the doorway, who rented out the required *abayahs*, slipped these over our heads. I was not used to so much clothing in the heat of August in a desert country. Inside the abayah I soon was very uncomfortable, sweating profusely beneath the heavy, hot fabric. Still I found the mosque fascinating. Its floors were covered with beautiful carpets on which the worshipers sat during prayers. No Methodist pews here. Our guide pointed out the *mihrab,* a niche in the wall necessary to all mosques, showing the direction of the Holy City of Mecca toward which worshipers faced during the service. When people prayed at home, they also faced Mecca. This mosque, which was built over a former Christian church, still had some traces of that earlier holy place. There was a baptismal font, stopped up since the building had become a mosque. A large shrine with a heavy red velvet curtain hanging just inside its bars, according to Christian and Muslim tradition, holds the severed head of John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus who had announced his ministry. I was puzzled to see local women tucking small notes between the bars. Gillian told us that barren women often wrote notes of supplication to Saint John, asking for the birth of a son.

Among other sites, we had a glimpse of the Sajidch Mosque, built by the Iranians, a gorgeous blue and white-tiled shrine to Fatima, Mohammed's daughter. Its tiles are reputed to be exquisite, but we saw only those on the exterior, which were impressive. I had admired the fine artwork in ceramic tiles from the Middle East in museums of Paris and London. Now, in Damascus I could view them in place, where they were truly magnificent.

Mel and I were anxious to go north to Aleppo, but the diplomats insisted we must wait until one of them could drive us there. In the meantime, we explored Damascus, hung out with the young Fulbrighters and enjoyed the library at the American Center, where they held classic American literature and some periodicals. We didn't know then how hard it would be to get English language books and papers in Aleppo.

On to Aleppo

At last the day came, and Assistant Ambassador Jim Wilson drove us north on the M-5 International Highway that parallels the Western border of Syria. This was our first experience of the Syrian roadway oases that provided gas, tea, and light meals to travelers. The one where we stopped had two dining rooms, one for men and another for families, which was the only one women could go into. This was also our introduction to one measure the society used to keep men and women apart.

Late in the afternoon, when we arrived in Aleppo, Wilson thought it would be best to go directly to the university and let them know their new professor had arrived. We stopped at the President's office. I was surprised to see two young men with rifles lounging about the office. Wilson conversed in Arabic with the secretary, and we were told the President was not in. Later the English faculty passed around the rumor that the President went to France from time to time for treatment of his narcolepsy. He had been falling asleep at inappropriate times during meetings and formal events.

We were not directed to the Vice President of the university, but rather were sent to the International Language Institute to meet Dr. Mohammed, who was the university's Dean of the Faculty. His International Language Institute was not part of the English Department, but, we eventually learned, was a separate, money-making enterprise run by Dr. Mohammed. He also held other important offices in the university administration, but I never understood which ones.

We were ushered into an auditorium where twenty-five or thirty people were holding a meeting of the faculty. Dr. Mohammed continued with his meeting, after telling Jim we were welcome to sit in on it. We did, although it was all conducted in Arabic so I didn't understand a word, and I felt an outsider. I thought of Emily Dickinson's second stanza of "*By the Sea*":

> the frigates in the upper floor
> extended hempen hands,
> Presuming me to be a mouse
> Aground, upon the sands

Wilson fidgeted in his chair and seemed uncomfortable, and I was tired and anxious. Mel and I didn't know it then (and didn't find out for more than a year), but this was an insult to the diplomat and to me, part of the Baath Party's

policy of accepting American aid, while always asserting Syrian superiority. After the meeting Jim said he thought he should drop us off at our hotel, so we would have a little time to get settled. In the morning we would be on our own.

At the Tourist Hotel our room was as small and plain as the one in Damascus. The twin beds turned out to be just as hard as those in Damascus, but now I knew why. The first afternoon when we had driven from the airport into Damascus, I noted the large number of balcony railings in the city that had long strings of black and brown somethings hanging over them. The diplomats told me these were strands of sheep's wool that were used to stuff mattresses and pillows. The good housewives took these out each summer, and washed and hung them out to dry before stuffing them again into the mattress and pillow covers. There was a special baseball-bat-like tool used to pound the wool into place. This made the beds and pillows as hard as rocks.

After dinner, we unpacked and discussed what we had seen so far of Aleppo and the university. I had been to Aleppo earlier with the Malone Fellowship, but I had seen only a little of the city including just a brief look at the university.

The city's name means both "white" and "milk" in Arabic, in reference to its beautiful buildings made of white limestone and also to the legend that on the Quwayq River, the patriarch, Abraham, once stopped to milk his cow. The Aleppians dispute the claim of Damascus to being the oldest continuously settled city in the world, contending that Aleppo is equally 9,000 years old.

When we looked out the window we saw before us the main post office on one side of a large square. Dominating the square was the hulking statue of a worker, lofting a mallet, Russian style. Local workmen, most of them wearing the long, gray *galabeyya*, although a few wore gray overalls, hurried about. When the call of prayer came from the amplifiers of all the mosques in the city, a few of them unrolled prayer mats and sank down to pray. Several, who had no mats, spread a clean sack. We felt we were in a city very different from Cedar Rapids, Iowa. This, we felt, was the Exotic East.

Our first day in Aleppo had been exciting, and we were tired. But before I could go to sleep, I rubbed the covers of the *Anthology of American Poetry* and my beloved copy of Thoreau's *Walden* that I had placed on the bedside table. They were not Aladdin's lamp, but a little pat could do no harm, and I made a silent wish. I had seen David Lean's 1962 film, *Lawrence of Arabia* with Peter O'Toole acting the part of Lawrence as he led an Arab army across the desert. Impressed by the romantic story of the movie, I had read Lawrence's book, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. In the West he was a hero, and in 1962 I had no doubts about the authenticity of the story, and I knew nothing about subsequent events that helped create the Middle East as we knew it in 1996. Having arrived in Aleppo, even though I then knew better, I allowed myself to dream a foolish dream, not that I would lead a daring military expedition, but perhaps I would attract an army of eager learners who would go on to become leaders of a freer and more open society in Syria. For a moment, there at the beginning, I entertained briefly my altogether too foolish and grand romantic dreams. Fortunately, when more awake, I recognized my folly, and I had the good sense to never name myself aloud: *Ann of Aleppo*.

Changing Places
The Ancient Crossroads of Aleppo

The folly of believing that Mel and I would become major agents of change in Syria becomes obvious upon noting that we were just two more foreigners arriving after millennia at a crossroad of Eurasia.

In Syria the past was always present to remind me how recent I was and how little I knew about the history of Syria, the Middle East and all its invaders. Not only had the rulers changed, but the geographical borders changed, and the people occupying the land changed. Our Arab Syrian friends often cited their allegiance to family, and indeed family ties were essential in the Syria where Mel and I found ourselves. Especially among the Arab population "blood" was important, even essential to self-definition. I wondered how much most of the people knew about the various groups who had left their blood and DNA in Syria. For example, until recently, today's Syria and Lebanon were one nation with one history. In this ancient place, we had to revise our concepts of the modern world.

It is easy to think about the countries of the ancient world as being isolated — lacking modern means of travel and exchange of goods, ideas, and stories. But a girl from an isolated farm and her husband from a little town in Iowa found themselves walking on roads where ancient merchants and armies traveled to trade and invade. Look at a map of the ancient Silk Road, the network of Eurasian trade routes active since the 2nd century BC. The routes from the west begin in Constantinople/Istanbul and pass through Aleppo and Damascus, or they begin in Cairo and pass through Damascus on the way to Palmyra and Bagdad and onward to India and China. From ancient times until the 13th and 14th century travels of Marco Polo and after, exchanges of all kinds between Europe, Africa and Asia passed through Syria. Naturally, political and military control of this region has been contested

throughout history. Armies and peoples have come and gone, and always remnants remained.

A Syrian friend reminded us that although the kings and generals go home after an invasion, common soldiers often are left behind. They marry the local women and raise families. One civilization never fully usurps another, and from their amalgamation, a new society emerges. We saw evidence of this exchange in the museum at Tartus.

We were looking at sarcophagus lids. The stone tops had carvings of faces and bodies like those we had seen in the National Museum in Cairo. The discovery of ancient graves has yielded evidence of millennia of historical, economic, cultural and political ties between Egypt and Syria. The ancient Egyptians and Syrians enjoyed a trading partnership as early as 2250 BCE through the Mediterranean port at Byblos. The Egyptians bought timber for boat building; the fragrant cedars of Lebanon became pillars in their palaces, and mountain timber from the region was used in constructing the pyramids.

Ambitious leaders in nearby countries looked at Syria's ideal geographic trading position, between Europe and the East, as well as its abundant grain fields and olive groves, and were drawn to try to control it through conquest. Among the earliest invaders were the Minoans around 1500 BCE. They were followed by the Mycenaeans, whose traders developed a system of writing that became the foundation of our modern alphabet. The Hittites from modern Turkey contested with Egypt for control of the Syrian region during the Late Bronze Age (1600-1200 BCE). Newer and more successful invaders were the Phoenicians, who came by sea and gained control of the major ports on the Mediterranean. Under their influence trade flourished. Cedar logs from what is today Lebanon perfumed Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem, and perhaps the palace where King David seduced Bathsheba. Then the Assyrian Persians contested the region between the 900 and 600 BCE, followed by the Persians in the 500s and 400s BCE. One of our Syrian friends, Mrs. Anil Gregorian, told us she was a descendant of the Assyrians, (today's Iranians) who had several times conquered and ruled Syria. The Greeks opposed the Persians, and this began what the Greek historian, Herodotus, characterized as a confrontation between the civilizations of the East and the West, a contest that continues into our present day. Alexander the Great extended Greek influence over the entire region, including Egypt, where his port city of Alexandria became the political and artistic center of Asia Minor. After his death, his successors, Ptolemy I and Ptolemy II, both Greeks, continued and supported the preservation and spread of learning and the arts. One of them, historians aren't sure which, founded the Great Library of Alexandria to collect all the books in the world. The Greeks were eventually displaced by the Romans, who by the beginning of the Common Era, ruled throughout the Mediterranean. As the power of the Roman Empire waned, Christianity became a powerful cultural force. Not long after came the Arab conquest in the 7th Century. After the death of Mohammed (the founder of Islam) in 632, the united Arab tribes formed an army of conquest that swept across all of the Byzantine Middle East, including Syria and Egypt. Soon all of Persia was conquered, as well. Persians emphasized economic and political aspects of society, bringing to government the age-old Arabic traditions of consultation and persuasion. They had a lively aesthetic sense and loved poetry, music, dance and wine. But a reactionary Islamic conservatism emerged in Arabia and to the east, and various Muslim Caliphates, centered in Bagdad, arose and imposed more austere customs and values.

In the centuries after the Arab conquests, Aleppo changed hands frequently, passing from Turkish Hamidids to Arabs from Bagdad to Bedouin Merdasids, and then back to Turks. Centuries of political chaos drew the attention in the 11th Century of Pope Urban II. He called for a crusade to establish Christian rule in what was the "Holy Land," where Christianity began. Two centuries of bloody conflict followed as one crusade after another sought western control over Jerusalem in particular, but actually over the entire eastern Mediterranean region. European armies invaded, and Turks fought them off. During our time in Syria, I was surprised to see a large number of red-headed Aleppo Arabs — reminders of the invading Crusaders. Into this mix entered Mongols, invaders from the north, who destroyed Bagdad in 1258 and occupied Syria for more than forty years. During our stay, we heard Syrians use "Mongol" as a pejorative. Ottoman Turks marched into Syria in 1561 and, eventually, controlled most of the eastern Mediterranean region, expanding their influence into Europe as far as Austria.

In 1862 the brilliant general, Abrahim Pasha, ruler in Egypt, won independence from the Ottoman government in Constantinople. After capturing Damascus, he established for the first time what we recognize now as the nation of Syria, setting up a centralized government and a regular system of taxation. Allowing Europeans to wear European dress when entering Damascus, he opened diplomatic relations with England and allowed a British consulate. Forty years after this opening, the British appointed Sir Richard Burton as Consul. Becoming enamored of the Eastern fairy tales, he collected many into *The Thousand And One Nights*, bringing the romance and

imagination of the oral literature of the Middle East to the Western world.

Despite such openings to peaceful relations between the Middle East and Europe, religious tensions persisted, often exploited by those seeking political power. In what is today Lebanon, Ottomans inflamed Muslims against the Christian Maronites. In 1860 this culminated in the massacre of 10,000 Christians in the mountains, and of thousands of Christians in Damascus. When Ottoman rulers were displaced in Turkey in 1909, nationalist and religious fanatics, the Young Turks, persecuted the Christian Armenians in their midst, leading to the Armenian genocide of 1915-1917, in which millions died.

At the end of World War I, Thomas Edward Lawrence gave the Arabs of the Syrian region hope that they would be free of outside domination. His heroic adventures depicted in the movie *Lawrence of Arabia* were the source of my earliest, romantic ideas about the Middle East. A brilliant Oxford scholar, he had spent the summer of 1908 in Syria, studying for his thesis all seventeen crusader castles, documenting their defenses, examining the terrain and learning the various Arabic dialects. Later he would write *The Seven Pillars Of Wisdom* (1926) about the Middle East. When the war broke out, he was sent to Syria by British General Allenby of the Egypt Command. In 1917, perhaps without proper military instructions, he rode out into the desert to contact his friend, Stewart Francis Newcombe, and they planned a raid on the Turkish garrison at Aqaba. The daring plan was to ride in from the barren desert, which was generally considered impassable. They surprised the Turks who had mounted cannons along Aqaba's seafront pointing out to sea, believing the British would attack with their navy. Lawrence's stratagem succeeded, and the West came to see Lawrence as a hero. His Arab allies had understood that when the war was over, they would become self-governing. This didn't happen, because the British and French had secretly agreed to divide the Middle East among them and signed the Sykes-Picot agreement on the partition of the Ottoman Empire.

Sykes-Picot gave France control of Lebanon and Syria, adding to the mix of Syrian culture the influence of French cuisine, education, and health care. Syria was able to obtain independence in 1945 after World War II, but French influence persisted. Hafiz al-Assad, who was the President of Syria when Mel and I were there, emphasized education, because he attributed his success to his boyhood education by French nuns. In 1996-98 Syrian law provided that every child go to school through the eighth grade. This is a standard adopted by many developing countries, but it is not always enforced. In Syria it was. There had been powerful opposition from Muslim traditionalists to al-Assad's education law because the schools were to be coeducational.

Probably the most decisive event in the region after World War II was the establishment of Israel as a modern state in 1948. The consequent displacement of Palestinians became a main cause of enmity and conflict thereafter, which, even as I write this in 2024, has eventuated in a savage war raging from Gaza to Lebanon. When we were in Syria, travel between Israel and Syria was forbidden. One could not enter Syria with an Israeli stamp in one's passport. Several (maybe most) of the young Junior Fulbrights we met later claimed they had gone to Israel, asking the Israeli official to stamp a piece of paper rather than the passport. This was supposed to work, but mistakes could be made, and Mel and I chose not to risk this. We'd also heard that an American college student who had come to visit one of the Fulbrights had been turned away at the airport in Damascus because he had passed through Israel on his way. We met no Syrians who claimed Jewish ancestry, though we knew that Jews had lived in the region for millennia, and their genes and culture must also be part of the Syrian stew of peoples.

Beginning in the 1980s, the Syrian regime allied itself with Russia. We noticed the influence of Russia in the massive sculpture of a worker in the large public square in front of the post office, and in the signs of businesses in both Arabic and Russian. One day Syrian friends took us east to see the Euphrates River and the new dam the Russians helped Syria build. It was to establish a lake and support irrigation in the most arid part of the country, while also generating electricity. But water is a problem throughout the region, and the Turkish government had dammed the river further north near its beginning in a dry plateau in Turkey. The result had been to diminish the flow of water downstream into Syria. We saw the generation plant above the river, now high, dry, and unusable.

The Russians also encouraged the use of collective farms. We saw one of these along the road between Aleppo and Damascus, where the farmers were harvesting wheat and threshing it with a new John Deere machine. In Syria there were many small farms that had been subdivided many times, since when a father died, his land was divided between his sons. Many of these farms were now too small to support a family, so from an economic standpoint, collectivization seemed like a good idea, but there was resistance.

Late in the 1980's, when the Russians were no longer able to finance their pet projects, their influence waned. Money had been the grease of influence. In the late 1990s, little visible evidence of their influence remained, except for the Russian

signs and the bottle of vodka still in the bar at the famous old Hotel Baron.

A more enduring Russian influence may have been in education. The Russian government had recruited students to study engineering at Russian universities during the glory days of the 80's. A number of young Syrians had gone to Russia and earned degrees. Almost certainly, many Syrian engineers had memories of their life in Russia, whether good or bad. Engineering was a favorite major. I don't know what effect this had on Syria, but when people get to know a society and individual people whom they like, their attitude toward the country's government may be influenced, also.

This then is the nation to which we had brought our hopes and illusions. When we were there, the country was prospering, and it was a magic time for us. While living under a dictatorship was difficult -- with several security organizations spying on us -- we made so many good friends, and we had the protection of the Fulbright Program and of the international school where Mel volunteered. These were privileges ordinary Syrians citizens did not enjoy, and we were fortunate to have no serious encounters with the notoriously corrupt bureaucracy. Our second landlord, who was an attorney, told us that probably only one or two judges in Syria were honest. He also observed that in the local Aleppo court, any document a lawyer needed for a case could be obtained only after paying the clerk a bribe. We learned the many civil servants were so poorly paid that such bribes seemed essential. Syria had the trappings of democracy and fairness, but this was not reality.

Syria was a rich sea of peoples and cultural influences: Egyptian, Greek, Persian, Roman, Arab, Mongol, French, Russian, Christian, Jewish, Islamic, and many others. Our new Syrian friends were proud of their families, their ancestry, and their blood, but I wonder how many of them understood the complex origins of their inheritances, both in body and mind. Dropped into this richness and complexity, we began to make our way, understanding more clearly every day that whatever we might contribute to this sea would be modest drops in the great rivers of history that flowed into it. In any case, with the reservation of not liking Syria's government, we came to love the fascinating country and its beautiful people.

Finding a Home

Main Persons

Abdullah Nassar: A professor at the University of Aleppo. He was our first landlord, and we learned to call him Ab.

Fatima Nassar: Ab's wife was an elementary teacher at ICARDA, the international school in Aleppo.

Their three children were:
Mohammed, the officious son.
Sheera, a teen-ager.
Sarah, a charming five-year-old.

Zeena: Our downstairs neighbor, a divorcee with two teenaged daughters and a son in elementary school.

Mahmoud: A young university student who became Mel's close friend and a valued advisor in our navigation of Syrian society.

The Fulbright Commission in Syria leaves its recipients on their own to find lodging, although there is a modest stipend to cover expenses until something permanent is found. We quickly realized that our need for a base was urgent and that finding it would be difficult.

So much was strange to us in our new city — mainly the language, of course. It is disorienting to hear speech all around you, but have no idea what is being said. Add the strange dress of so many people, the amplified call to prayer five times a day, the shabby old horses pulling carts of produce into the city early each morning, the Spartan hotel room with its uncomfortable single beds — we needed space, to prepare our own meals, to sleep in comparative peace. We rightly anticipated hard days ahead in this strange land. We needed a refuge from the bad traffic, lack of empathy from officials at the university, the students who cheated or made other trouble, the many mistakes we would make, the heat or cold and the noise of the streets.

After several weeks of fruitless searching, aided by the Gregorian family who eventually became our closest Syrian friends, we had what seemed a stroke of good luck. As I began to connect with the university, I called upon the Dean of the Language and Literature Department. I found him at his office in an ugly three story stucco building. He had a thin face, long, hooked nose, and spoke careful English. He told me he had his Ph.D. from Norwich University in England, and he asked me about the University of Iowa from which I had my Ph.D. He said he had never heard of it, but he was happy to have an American Fulbright

to teach American literature. "Although," he added, "there isn't as much of it as of the rich trove of English literature." His voice had been noncommittal, but I couldn't help hearing a little deprecation of American literature. He went on to explain this building housed the Departments of English, French and Arabic; English on the first floor.

Then he asked if my husband and I had found suitable housing. I assured him we were still looking, and that I was hoping to find something within walking distance to the university.

"I have a flat that's available," he said. "Would you like to look at it?"

The next morning he came to our hotel to get us. His place was a new building in a new addition to the section of the city called University. He explained that the government, to increase housing, had a program wherein anyone associated with the university could save money regularly, and when four of these savers had accumulated enough, their four-plex was built. We passed the university's gates on the way, giving us a chance to estimate the distance to Nasser's building. We guessed it to be a little more than two miles away. Moreover, it was on a street with only two other houses, both under construction, and many empty lots. The custom in Syria was that the materials of construction were piled in the streets in front of the lot, so we saw the streets were strewn with piles of sand and gravel, stone building blocks, and rebar. The Dean's flat was in a new white limestone four-plex on the first floor. It had a modern kitchen, although I noted the kitchen range seemed to be only a cooktop. Mel found the bathroom did not have a shower ring or curtain, and the toilet was the Syrian squat kind. The Dean hastily said he'd have a Western toilet installed if we took the place. However, the flat was unfurnished. Mel and I had already decided since my contract was only for one academic year, it would be too difficult to buy furniture and then have to sell it before we went home.

We looked at each other. There were too many negatives. We thanked the Dean and politely declined his flat.

Back at the hotel, the clerk gave us a letter. It was from Abdulla Nassar. He introduced himself as a professor at the university who was going to Saudi Arabia for a job, and he had a flat to rent while he and his family were away. He said he had sent us a letter to the states, telling about this opportunity, but apparently it hadn't reached us in time. He would come by the next morning to pick us up and show it to us.

We hoped that maybe Abdullah's place was the right one. We were tired of looking, tired of being without our own home.

The next morning Mr. Nassar was at the bottom of the stairs to meet us. He was a short, rotund man with gray hair.

"Just call me Ab," he said, shaking hands, "the American way." He explained that he had a Ph.D. from Purdue University, thanks to a Fulbright grant, and now he averred, "I'm very Americanized." He drove us past the university's gates, so we could see how close his flat was to where I would work.

His flat was also in University. There we met his wife, Fatima, who had a sharp face and small, black eyes. I wondered if they were a long-ago reminder of Tamerlane's sacking of Aleppo in 1400. Fatima was obviously a shrewd and capable woman. During the school year she had taught one of the elementary classes at the Aleppo international school, the International Consortium for Agriculture in Dry Areas (ICARDA). ICARDA was primarily for the children of the scientists from all over the world who worked in Aleppo. She had obtained a degree in elementary education while Ab was working on his Ph.D. She hastened to tell me why she worked. "Before we married," she said, "we agreed we would both work and together we could have a lot more money, a lot more." I was then unaware that few Syrian women held jobs, especially when married.

The couple had three children; the two oldest, Mohammed, a brooding boy about fifteen, who, Ab said, was a superior student and would become a doctor, and Sheera, a large teen-aged girl, who followed her mother around like a puppy; both spoke English well. They had learned it when they lived in the United States. The little girl, about five, was lively, and her large brown eyes sparkled. She had been born in West Lafayette, Indiana, and was an American citizen, she proudly told me. She was so disappointed when I had to tell her I didn't speak Arabic. She patted my hand and said, "I'll teach you." She was a darling, and I wanted to hug her.

Mel thought Ab was a fine fellow. However, I was a little put off by his Chamber of Commerce comradery, just as I had been a little put off by Mel's colleagues at the firm where he had worked — them and their Junior Chamber of Commerce "exhausted rooster" jokes. I told myself, I must not be so quick to make judgments. I must try to think more positively. I did like the flat and its location. I loved the three balconies.

Aleppo being a big city, Mel and I agreed we would look a little longer before making a decision. Ab warned us the money the Fulbright Commission gave me for lodging would run out. We were already acutely conscious of this. When I asked Ab when they were leaving for Riyadh, his answer was lengthy and not specific. I pressed him, and he then said, "I have a solution to the problem. I own the furnished flat just below ours.

The divorcee and her children who are going to rent the flat aren't ready to move in yet. Why don't you try it out, and get used to the neighborhood?"

Mel and I looked at each other. It was true both of us were worried the stipend for relocation was almost exhausted. When Ab showed us the flat dug out of the hillside below his, we were impressed. We would try this neighborhood.

So, we found a store and bought some sheets and towels and a few things we thought we'd need. Ab drove us and our suitcases to the university district, and we moved in.

The second evening we were there, Ab announced we were invited to a little get-together in the garden — a paved space around the first level flat where we were staying. Fatima's sister, newly married, and her husband would be their guests. We readily agreed, a little party for the newlyweds — that would be fun. In early September, the days still were very hot, but the desert evenings cooled off. The dark garden was very pleasant. Both the bride and groom were middle-aged. Fatima had confided before they arrived that the family had thought this sister would never marry. But she had gone on a vacation to Latakia on the sea and met this very suitable man. Now the sister, who had been a clerk in a government agency, would not have to work anymore. The bridal couple passed around some of their wedding snapshots. Mel politely said to the bride, "Come over and sit by me and explain these pictures." She didn't move. Neither did anyone else. Mel and I didn't know why. It seemed strange that she didn't respond in any way. We did not know then that in this society, it would be thought sexually flirtatious if she responded.

We had been in the apartment a week when Ab told us the divorcee and her family were suddenly anxious to move in. Again, he had a solution. "You could live with us; we could be a family until we leave. You can see Syrian family life."

Mel and I decided to take a walk and talk this over. Ab was a shrewd operator I thought. "If we move upstairs," I said, "it'll mean we're taking his flat." Mel pointed out all its advantages, including the ceiling fans they brought back from the States, a feature we had seen in no other Syrian house. In 1996 there was no air conditioning in Syria nor any ceiling fans in Aleppo, not even in the luxury flat of our first friends in Aleppo, the Gregorians.

When we returned, Ab extolled the benefits of his plan. He again pointed out we were spending money unnecessarily, and it would soon run out. He was sure we hadn't seen any place as convenient as his. He would show us where we could easily catch one of the mini-buses that would take us downtown and to the restaurants. Fatima would show me around the nearby market. He would walk with me several times to the university, so I would be sure of the quick and easy route. He knew how to persuade us.

I sighed, but I saw it was inevitable that we would take his flat, so I did a little bargaining. "We can't take your flat unless we have a table and chairs in the dining room." At the present the dining room's only furniture was a large freezer like the one my mother had on the farm. They had brought it back from the States.

"I have to have a TV," Mel said. He wanted American football in the fall and all the football scores.

"I can manage that," Ab promised. "but it's more difficult. There's a problem about the antenna, there are rules prohibiting them."

"I see them on hundreds of buildings in the city," Mel said.

"I can fix that," Ab assured us.

So now it was time to ask about the rent. All the landlords we had seen insisted that all twelve months had to be paid in advance. Ab, too, insisted that the full amount was payable in advance. We still did not know what a reasonable rent should be. We had asked the American diplomats in Damascus, but they could give us no help. We asked our new Armenian friends, but the prices in the Christian Quarter seemed high to us. Ab's price seemed expensive, too, but his flat was close to what we needed. However, we had left most of our American dollars in the safe at the American Center in Damascus. We planned that Mel would go to Damascus from time to time to get more cash as we needed it for daily expenses. I suggested that we could give Ab a check he could cash in Riyadh (Syria had no banking system at that time.)

"We will do business tomorrow," Ab said. "Now Fatima has prepared a lunch for us."

But before he could distract us, I insisted that Ab tell us exactly the day they would leave. Finally, he named a day — two weeks away.

"We'll have a good time," he insisted. "We'll be a Syrian family."

I could see Mel was anxious to get settled, and I was, too. We discussed it that evening. I had some qualms, but surely I was worrying over details that must be minor. When I was young, home was my mother's house; when in college, I worked for my room and board in Mrs. Roadman's house. When I went to Washington, D. C. after graduation, it was the apartment of Mel's sister and her friends. I had been so happy to have *my* house after we were married. In 1996 we had been married for nearly 44 years, and I had been the lady of the house. I was not anxious to move into Fatima's house. But it was only for two weeks. Why was I having such qualms? Was I becoming a fussy old woman? Restraining my reservations, I agreed to the arrangement.

So we moved upstairs. In the evening we chatted while Fatima and I did the dishes. Fatima had already told me that while she was born and grew up in Aleppo, Ab was a Palestinian from a family that had been displaced or forced out of Palestine in 1948 when that country became Israel.

There were several camps for Palestinians in Syria, administered and funded by the United Nations. Mel and I found out much later that there was a lot of prejudice against Palestinians in Syria. Palestinians could not work in the Syrian economy unless they were educated or had special skills. Ab was lucky to be educated and to have found a job, and because of him, his parents could live in Aleppo.

The next day Ab announced his arrangement for the TV. "The TV set will be about three hundred dollars, and the antenna about the same. Then another hundred for the workmen and the delivery. All-in-all about seven hundred. My friend, the mechanic, whom I brought around yesterday — you met him last week — will make all the arrangements, get all the equipment for you and see that it's installed. He owes me money, and if you add the TV costs to the check for me, he will have paid me back."

"Do you have a contract for us to sign?" Mel asked.

"There's no need," Ab said. "We don't need a lawyer. They just cost money. We'll do it the American way, shake on it."

Ab didn't know that Mel was a lawyer. Mel merely smiled, and we all shook hands.

The next morning Fatima announced that they were going out to ICARDA to say goodbye to her friends at work. She asked Mel if he wanted to go along and meet the new acting principal, a man from Canada. Ab also was interested in going to ICARDA. He had applied to be the new principal at the school, but hadn't been chosen. He wanted to look over the new administration. The three of them went off to the school, while I began organizing my course syllabus.

A few days later, Ab's mechanic showed up at the door with the TV, workmen and an antenna. Soon the TV was tuned to the only English language station, European BBC. As it turned out, their coverage of American news was scanty, and there was nothing about American football scores -- no American football at all, but an excess of fashion shows that interested neither of us.

Now part of a Syrian family, we spent the evenings together. Ab reminisced about his days at Purdue University and his good friends on the faculty. Fatima told us stories about the prophet, Mohammed, and his kindness. She talked Mel into buying ten copies of her Syrian cookbook to give to friends at home. She explained that wearing the *hijab* was not hot to her, but cool, because it was an outward sign of her faithful adherence to the Muslim religion. "There's a lot of prejudice against our religion," she said, pursing her lips. "An American, who had been principal of ICARDA International School, was fired a few months ago, because he was converting to our religion." I, too, felt this was unfair. A firm believer in academic freedom, I saw this as an assault on the independence of teachers everywhere. I wondered what the new principal was doing about it.

Our evenings were further enlivened by the delightful little Sarah. She chatted away and danced around us. All the family adored her, the older children evincing not a scintilla of jealousy. I was reminded of my youngest brother who came into our family late as a surprise. From the beginning he had been so loving, so accepting, so charming that all five of us older children loved him and believed he was a magic child. Sarah was, also, of that rare magical species.

The morning came when Ab and Fatima had to complete their arrangements to go to Saudi Arabia. When I heard what sounded like scratching noises on the side of the house, I looked over the balcony and saw a small door and two strangers and Mohammed, Ab's son, working close to the foundation. I went down to see what was happening and found two workmen pulling wires out of a box and separating them.

"What are they doing?" I asked.

Mohammed, who seemed to be supervising, and proud that he was in charge, answered, "They have to connect the telephone wires for the divorcee's phone."

"Do the wires for the phone in your flat come from that box, too?"

'Yes, and I'm making sure they get it right," he said in his officious voice.

I found it hard to like this kid. He was so pompous and sure of himself. I felt sure he was looking down on a woman who didn't know about telephone wires.

However, later, when I bought the ingredients to cook some of the meals for the family, he very efficiently took me to the meat market at the historic, downtown *suq,* where I saw the carcasses of sheep and cattle hanging from hooks in the open air and, so, not refrigerated. Spread out on display were white enamelware pans of brains, livers, hearts, intestines, all surrounded by ice.

Down the Rabbit Hole

We had found a flat, but I felt uneasy there. At the beginning there were days in Syria when I felt like Alice as she tumbled down the rabbit hole. Our world turned upside down when it became obvious to me that Ab was cheating us.

After two weeks with Ab and his family, I sighed in relief when they left for Riyadh. No more

mornings of Fatima and the doughy daughter, scurrying around the flat in their food-stained housecoats as voluminous as their *abayahs*. No more of Ab's boasting about his good faculty friends at Purdue. Now the place was ours. I had given him a check he could cash in Riyadh for nine month's rent plus the $700 for the TV, antenna, and installation. We agreed we would pay for the telephone and electricity, and after the winter was over, we would refill the furnace's oil tank.

Before they left, Ab and Fatima hurried about carrying arms full of things into their bedroom, and on the last day, they locked it with an enormous padlock. I was a little surprised. They said nothing about renting us only a two-bedroom flat, not three. I had already invited the Junior Fulbrights in Damascus to come visit us. I had counted on having plenty of room, but in the face of all their consideration for us and Mel's gratitude to them for their help, I said nothing. It was their last day after all.

Fatima put an another enormous padlock on the freezer. That seemed a little insulting. Did she think I would have stolen any of her frozen food? But I kept quiet, struggling to understand the manners and customs of this White Rabbit Hole we had fallen into. After all, a dining room table with chairs had arrived, and Fatima had taken me to the nearby farmer's market and introduced me to the vendors. Ab walked with me several times to the university so I would know my way. They had been very helpful. When I questioned Mel about only two bedrooms, he said. "It's nothing. We have the ceiling fans, and Fatima left her American electric mixer for you." Yes, there was so much that was pleasant — the balconies and, in the kitchen, a beautiful view of one of Aleppo's newest mosques with three minarets lit with green spotlights at night. We planned to get a screen for that window so it could be left open and we would have cross ventilation. We had not found screens in any of the flats we looked at. I was reminded of my poet friend, David Ray's story about looking for flats in India when he was a Fulbright there. When he asked for window screens, the landlady had berated him, "Screens! Screens! That's an American problem."

I also had been troubled by the arrangement with Ab's little mechanic friend for the TV that he was using as his repayment to Ab of a long-standing debt. Feeling I had been too negative from the beginning of this adventure, from being fussy about flats back to criticizing Mel's red suspenders at the beginning of our trip, I silenced my questions and anxieties, as long as I could. But too soon, perhaps, I burst out, "It doesn't seem right!"

Mel reminded me how good Ab had been, how helpful both he and Fatima were. Of all the flats we'd seen this really was the best. "Stop worrying," Mel said. "Come and look at this." He led me out onto the dining room's balcony. He handed me a pair of binoculars and pointed very low on the horizon. There was the fireball and sparkling trail of the comet, Hale-Bopp, which was visible to the naked eye as soon as it was dark. Hale-Bopp was the brightest comet in the 20th century, with its fireball trailing spangles across the sky for eighteen months. We watched it almost every evening. Yes, this flat was a great location for us. But still, something was not right.

Zeena, who had moved into the lower flat with her two teen-aged daughters and plump grade-school son, soon came upstairs, knocked on our door, and, speaking excellent English, said she wanted to get acquainted with her neighbors. She was friendly, and it was pleasant to speak English with someone so nearby. I asked her what a flat like ours should rent for. "I'm paying $400 a month," she said, "because I'm divorced Ab can charge me more. We planned to move in two weeks earlier, but Ab kept putting us off."

Now I began to see Ab had not been truthful. She had not delayed moving, but rather he had put her off, so he could get us into his building.

"I'm paying $800," I said. "That's probably more than double what it should be."

She nodded agreement.

When I told Mel about it, he said we could phone Ab in Riyadh and ask about it. He was still not willing to think Ab was trying to cheat us, making excuses for him. Despite the desert temperature, the temperature in our flat became decidedly cool. I persisted. "He's cheating us," I said, "or trying to." We did not quarrel loudly, but we lived for a time in different climates. I worried Mel might be right, although I felt pretty sure that Ab's show of friendship disguised his con job. Former Fulbrights in Aleppo had provided notes on their experiences, and I recalled that all had commented that the locals believe all Americans are rich, so they can ask any price, and the foreigner won't know whether it's fair. This makes sense, of course, but Ab was a skilled charmer, and I had to admit that his Mid-Western accent was disarming.

We tried to phone the number Ab had given us again and again at different times of the day and evening, but no one answered. We couldn't talk this problem over with him. Things were getting "curiouser and curiouser."

Once we were settled, it was time to phone our relatives at home, and we reported to them on our home-hunting. Both of us were a little uneasy about calling from the home phone in Ab's flat. One of the Fulbrights we met in Damascus said his wife, who was a Mexican national, phoned her mother, speaking Spanish, and a strange voice came on the line and said, "Speak English." We'd

learned the government spied on many people with its sixteen different security agencies. I remembered watching Ab's sullen son supervising workmen as they changed wires in the basement. We agreed we would take no chances. We went out to the ICARDA school where many of the international teachers phoned their home countries. By then, Mel had begun volunteering there, and we could use the school phone to talk to our daughter in Texas. When I told her about the arrangements for the TV, she exploded, "Oh, Mom, that's one of the oldest scams — the Aleppians probably used it on Marco Polo when he came through."

Although he hadn't talked about it, I hoped Mel, too, had become a little nervous about Ab's honesty after finding out from Zeena how much over the usual price he was charging us for the flat. Now, on the recommendation of our very serious, feet-on-the-ground, lawyer daughter, I was determined to do something about it.

Ab had been gone only about ten days, I thought; maybe he hadn't had time yet to cash my check. I decided to phone our U.S. bank and stop payment. This made me very nervous, but as the days passed, I became more and more incensed at Ab's scheming. I stopped the check.

Mel warned me that since we had a handshake agreement to pay the amount, I shouldn't have stopped payment. What did I know about the laws in Syria? Maybe I was getting into a lot of trouble. I worried that Mel might be right. Still, we really couldn't afford to lose so much money. So I wrote Ab a nice letter, trying to let him off the hook by saying he probably was unaware of the fair price of flats, he being a distinguished professor, concentrating on things of the mind, and that his mechanic friend had misled him. I would send him a new check for $600 a month for nine months, (still more than the fair price), and I said I could not pay him for the TV, which was probably a way his mechanic was trying to swindle him.

Within a few days we got a phone call from Ab. Now his phone worked. He was irate. He couldn't cash my check. After he had trusted us. He had shown us around. We had made a bargain, etc., etc. I did my best to mollify him, pointing out I was agreeing to pay him $200 more a month than was fair. He was very disappointed with Mel and me. We weren't like his good friends at Purdue. He believed in American honesty. He threw accusation after accusation at me. Now the King in this Rabbit Hole wanted to chop off my head. I received a few more calls from him like this, but I was angry at his cheating us, and I did not back down or send more money.

Mel gradually came around too. It was a big disappointment to him that his friend, Ab, had never really been our friend. After consulting with Mahmoud, our student friend and advisor, Mel sent the TV and antenna back to the dealer, and Mahmoud helped him find a reputable store, where Mel picked out a new TV and antenna. These were soon installed, but the channels were the same, only Arabic stations, except for an Israeli station in Hebrew and the same uninformative and football-free European BBC. Still, the climate in our home improved a great deal.

Then one evening the greasy little mechanic who installed the first TV showed up at our door. "Friends," he said.

"La," I said, using the Arabic word for no. "No friends."

He looked beseechingly at Mel. Mel said, "No friends," but he pulled out of his pocket what amounted to $50 in Syrian money and gave it to him. "For the workmen," he explained to the mechanic.

The mechanic began to whine and explain at length in Arabic. Ab was obviously guilty, but this man may have been innocent.

The local Royalty of Hearts had invited us to play the game in their garden, but we had successfully evaded a full beheading. Still, I was not really happy that we had some success in dealing with Ab's deceptions. Rather, I regretted that he wasn't really our friend, and I regretted even more that Mel had been so disappointed in this friendship.

I decided it was best that I say nothing at the university about Ab's perfidy. Perhaps this was the only time he had cheated. Maybe he only targeted foreigners. I knew that the Aleppo professors who went abroad could stay away only two years. He would soon be back at the University of Aleppo, and I didn't want to prejudice his colleagues against him.

Ab's Father: the Great Fire at The Hajj, April 1997

Before he left Aleppo, Ab introduced us to his white-haired father, a quiet, soft-spoken man, almost courtly in his manner, very unlike Abdullah. Because we liked his father, we decided Abdullah must take after his mother, whom we never met. It was customary — more or less required — that the oldest son take care of his parents. Ab's parents had lived in the lower flat before he rented it to Zeena and her children. He found another place for them somewhere else in the city. Ab told us, "He'll come over from time-to-time to check up and see how you're doing."

The old gentleman came by once a month in the afternoon when my classes were over. Although his English wasn't fluent, I enjoyed visiting with him before he looked around in the flat. I'm sure Ab had instructed him to see that we

were taking good care of everything and hadn't broken into their locked bedroom or freezer.

After we became better acquainted, he explained that he had another son who was studying in the U.S. "If he phones here, could you give him my new number?"

"Of course," I agreed, but no telephone call came. This wasn't the first time, nor the last, that someone asked me about a relative who had gone to the States and then disappeared. It was understandable. Some young men wanted to get away from a political system that made no room for them. Others were happy to escape the restrictions of their parents and disappear into the millions of Americans. Probably some of them had failed their college classes and could not lose face by admitting this.

One of the professors at the university told me Abdullah had sent money for his father and mother to meet him and his family at Mecca in April 1997 for the Hajj. One of the five pillars of Islam, the Hajj is the holy pilgrimage each Muslim, who could afford it, must make at least once in his lifetime. Many people save all their lifetimes to have enough to go.

"Are you now Hajji?" I asked Ab's father one day.

"Yes," he said. "You know we walked around the Kaaba seven times. I didn't know it was so large. Five-year-old Sarah got very tired, so we took turns carrying her. Now she's Hajji, too."

"Were you there during the fire?" I asked.

His face turned white. "It was terrible."

I thought he wouldn't tell me more, but after a long pause, he continued, "Our tent was in a row on a hillside. Below us was a valley with rows and rows of tents just like ours. A caravan of buses had brought many Pakistanis who were all staying down in the valley. The Saudis have built many hotels in Mecca for the pilgrims, but most can't afford hotels, so the Saudi government has also made tent villages available.

"There was a swift desert wind blowing that day. I could look down and see everything." He took a deep breath, and I refilled his tea cup.

"The wind blew a tent flap against a bottle of *mazoot* (a petroleum-derived oil) that had a kettle boiling on it. It caught instantly. The tent burst into flame. I wanted to run down there and get people out. But it was too far, a half mile or more." We drank our tea quietly in Aleppo, very much like the people in that tent. The people of the Middle East use the word *kismet* frequently. So much of life is chance. We were lucky to be sharing over our tea his story of bad luck in Mecca.

"Somehow an alarm was sounded, and firetrucks rushed to the entrances of the tent village. But they couldn't get through, because the pilgrims had parked their trucks and buses there, blocking the roadway. The fire trucks had to turn back."

I had seen these trucks and buses come through Aleppo with the Turkish pilgrims. The vehicles were overloaded with people, and piled on top were rugs for the floors of their tents, sleeping mats, clothes, tea kettles, skillets and cooking pans.

He went on, as if he had been keeping this story bottled up for a long time. "At first I thought the breeze would be a blessing to everyone and cool things off. But it spread the fire down the row of tents, *mazoot* bottles in every tent exploding."

He fell into a sort of trance as the events replayed in his imagination. His hands rattled the tea cup in its saucer. I gently took it and set it on the coffee table.

"My wife and I prayed. She held her prayer beads and was saying every one of the ninety-nine names of Allah. As a child, I had memorized the entire Quran. I was *hafiz*, but it's easy to lose much of it, if you don't practice regularly. Still, kneeling there, many of the blessed *sura* came back to me. We were two little timid voices against the fire, and we couldn't stop it.

"After the firetrucks were turned away, the Saudis sent in their helicopters. I thought now they would drop something to put out the fire."

He stopped, overcome.

I waited. I had heard on European BBC that 337 people died. That was the official number the Saudi government had given, but everybody distrusted Saudi statistics. Probably many more were lost.

"The helicopter blades fanned the flames, making them worse, driving them faster and further along the rows of tents. The inferno leaped from row to row. I saw a young man drag his parents from a tent just before the blaze leaped upon them, incinerating them all. I saw another young man carrying his father on his back, trying to outrun the fire. The flames caught them both."

Then he began to weep. "How could Allah let this happen? On the sacred Hajj?"

And I wept with him.

"My wife watched for as long as she could bear it. Then she said, 'They go to Paradise.' She was comforted by that. She found great comfort in the Hajj. She is content." Everything about his demeanor said that he was not content, though he did not voice it.

Muslims believe that if you die on the Hajj, the gates of heaven open immediately for you. Some people who are very sick, go for this reason, but because the Hajj takes place in their country, the Saudis can set the rules, and they discourage this practice. Taking care of the millions of pilgrims all coming during one week is a Herculean task.

One of our diplomat friends in Damascus told us the local man who paid for the new mosque in

our neighborhood went on the Hajj every year. It was rumored this man made his money by transporting Afghan marijuana across Syria in Army trucks for shipment to "refineries" in Europe. Maybe his annual pilgrimage was penance for his sins. Insulated from bad luck by his wealth, he would not need to stay in a tent. Perhaps he should rent one of the expensive hotel rooms often in this life, in case things did not go so well at the gates of Paradise.

"The Saudis were very good," Ab's father said. "They flew all the bodies back to Pakistan."

"And so you are now Hajji," I said.

"Hajji, Hajji," he sighed; there was no satisfaction in it. The old man had lost his enthusiasm, and I wondered if he had lost his faith, too.

Mahmoud: Mel's Student Friend

I don't remember when we first met Mahmoud. I believe it happened this way: one afternoon when I came home from the university, Mel and a young man were sitting around the table, drinking tea and eating cookies we bought from the neighborhood bakery. These had a filling of chopped, cooked dried figs surrounded with a thin crust. The Fig Newtons we bought in our Iowa grocery stores were a poor cousin to these delightful confections. Mel and this college-age man were talking animatedly in English, and the latter sounded like an American.

"Where did you learn your English?" I asked.

"Under the covers in my bed," he answered. "The government forbade listening to *The Voice of America*, but I could get it on my radio." His grasp of the language was surprising to me. We might have been home in Cedar Rapids. Later I learned his grandfather had been the interpreter to the French government when Syria had been made a French Protectorate after World War I. Perhaps there was a family ability and interest in language.

Mel met Mahmoud at the English Center library, which was separate from the university English Language Library. Mel had explored it, looking for more contemporary writing. Current English language papers and books were hard to come by. Mel and I were different readers. I had to re-read texts for my teaching, and returning to classic American writing was deeply pleasurable, but Mel wanted to be up on current events, and he was always searching for something new. He devoured the daily papers. He read whatever book our Sunday School class was studying. He loved the novels of John Grisham. While we did not always enjoy the same kinds of reading, still reading was essential for both of us, helping us engage with the world.

Mahmoud had overheard Mel speaking to the librarian and introduced himself. He wasn't in the English Department, but rather in the Engineering Department. This was not surprising, because Syrian students were admitted to the universities according to their scores on the baccalaureate exam at the end of high school. The students who made the highest scores could be admitted to medicine, the next best scores to pharmacy, followed by engineering, and law. Finally, students with the lowest scores could be admitted to Literature: French, English or Arabic. Of course, there were always some students who had a strong preference for one of the lower-rated disciplines. They could move down from what their scores allowed, but not up.

Mahmoud's family had something to do with the Syrian oil fields in the Eastern part of the country. I don't know whether they were part owners, or former owners whom the government forced out, or perhaps they were in charge of extraction or sales of the oil. Syrian oil was the heavy type, not the light, golden oil of Saudi Arabia's Eastern fields, thus Syrian oil was more expensive to refine. But all oil is money, and even heavy oil meant wealth. Mahmoud and his older brother were privileged young people.

I had found him and Mel laughing and joking when I returned home. "You remember that statue just outside of Damascus?" Mahmoud asked. Of course. we remembered the massive statue of President al-Assad.

"He stands there with his arms outstretched, like the statues of your Virgin Mary, just as good and benevolent." We all laughed.

The President was not known for benevolence; rather, he was notorious for his cruelty. The most egregious example was that he had sent his air force to bomb the city of Hama, not an international enemy's town, but one of Syria's own cities, after it became the center of political opposition. Reports said two thirds of the town were destroyed, and after the bombing, the President sent in the Army to find any political opposition who had not been killed by the bombers.

We would find out later that many of the people we knew were opposed to al-Assad. The President's grip on the country and its people was fierce. There was a lot of fear, although even those who surreptitiously told jokes about al-Assad, were grateful that he kept order in the society and in Syria's business community.

I wasn't surprised that Mahmoud connected the Virgin Mary to us Protestants. We were aware that most citizens of the Middle East thought all Americans were Catholics or Jews. Few knew about divisions within Christianity. There were no Protestant churches in Syria, but the British government sent a chaplain once a month to conduct Protestant services.

Mahmoud came over often, and became very helpful to us. We asked him about incidents and local mores we didn't understand. Once I told him I was uncomfortable with the armed guards at the university's gates. They seemed threatening to me and counter to the free thought and inquiry that an institution of learning should encourage and symbolize.

"I'm glad to see them there," Mahmoud said. "They came after the terrible days of the 1980's. I was a child when the Muslim Brotherhood was powerful, and there was fighting in the streets. I remember during the fighting our mother made my brother and me lie down on the floor, far from the windows. I was so scared of the gunfire below. Now we have security." Mahmoud was no supporter of dictatorship, but, like people everywhere, he needed a stable environment.

Mel and I were delighted to have a young friend. We had been very lonesome when the last of our four children left for college, and we missed the enthusiasm and sometimes crazy ideas of young people.

Like many young men, Mahmoud was interested in girls. In Syria in 1996, it was difficult for men and women to become acquainted and form friendships. Although Mahmoud was at the university, where he saw female students in all the disciplines, including the College of Engineering, it was difficult to interact with them. Most women students had been taught they shouldn't even look at a man who was not a family member, much less speak with one. They were supposed to keep their eyes downcast. Anything else was flirtatious.

He told us about a girl he saw at the student snack bar. "She was always with a girlfriend, and sometimes there were three or four together, giggling and teasing each other. One day I got the courage to speak to this group. They were dressed like liberal girls. They all covered their hair with scarves."

Except for the Christians, all the women students wore some form of the *hijab*. "Liberals" wore colorful silk scarves while the most conservative wore the traditional black *hijab*, and in the middle, were those who wore a knit hair cover that reminded me of a ski cap. It covered all their hair, much of the brow and the whole neck.

"I said, 'Hello, ladies,' and this caused even more laughter."

"One of them, the girl with the beautiful, big eyes, said, 'Hello, sir.' This caused all of them to laugh again. I had to think of something to say next."

"They were all drinking Orangina, so I said, 'I like Orangina, too.' It sounded so stupid, but I couldn't think of anything else.

"Then the girl with the beautiful eyes asked, 'Are you in the engineering college?'

"I admitted that I was.

"'Me, too,' she said, 'First year.'

"After that I watched for this group of girls at the snack bar in the afternoon, and sometimes they came, and we began to talk a little more. I found out the girl with the beautiful eyes was named Rula. I wanted to talk to her alone. But her friends were always with her."

Mel and I had learned early that in traditional families, young women and men were not supposed to talk to each other unless they were relatives. There were no mixed recreational activities. For example, though women were not prohibited from attending soccer games, no woman thought she could go without a female companion. In the U.S. young people could go to the movies, Mahmoud said, but in Syria, no woman would go, because of the lurid posters advertising films, and, worse, because the theaters were so dirty and were frequented by a disreputable, rough clientele. Worse yet, in my opinion, the films Hollywood made specifically for the international market featured the worst kind of mayhem, torture, and gory death. Syria had no theater, no orchestra, no chorus. The chief recreation in Aleppo was having a meal with your extended family. Once engaged, a couple could converse in limited privacy, and in more liberal families, they could go out to dinner together.

"These engaged couples," Mel asked, "what if they find after they can converse, that they don't like each other?"

"It happens all the time," Mahmoud said. I remembered my office-mate at the university telling me how she had to break her engagement because the night of their engagement party, the bridegroom told her she couldn't continue her graduate studies in England because he wasn't going to permit his wife to study or take a job.

Mahmoud went on, "Rula and I liked talking, and her eyes were so beautiful that I began to think about asking her to get engaged — only thinking about it.

"One day we were joking about one of her friends who had just become engaged, so I asked her if she had ever been engaged.

"'Let's,' she said. 'Let's get engaged.'

"This surprised me, but it was nice. I agreed before I could think about it."

"'I have to ask my father,' she said. 'I'll tell you tomorrow.'

"When I saw her the next day, she was wearing the black *hijab*. I knew something was wrong.

"She said, 'I asked my father about an engagement. He was angry because you and your family had not asked if you could come and talk with us about an engagement.'

"I was so surprised. I didn't know what to say."

"And she went on. 'Then my father asked, what kind of Muslim you are.'

"I was even more surprised, and I just stared at her."

"'We are Shia'a, and Father says I must marry Shia'a. I think you aren't Shia'a.'"

Mahmoud told us, "My family isn't religious. I had never thought about what religious differences meant. The worst is, I never saw her again. I think her father made her quit the university. Some families think educated women do not make good wives, but not me. My wife must be educated."

The girl with the beautiful eyes wasn't Mahmoud's last crush. There were others, but no engagements while we were there.

The Kindness of Strangers
Neighbors and the Neighborhood

Our home in Ab's flat had been built as a four-plex of two over two, with one neighbor across the hall from our door, and two flats above us. Ab had noticed the slight hill that the building occupied and somehow got permission (or ignored the rules) and dug out another flat under his, where Zeena lived, making the building a five-plex.

Although I entered only one of the flats above us, I am sure all four had the same floor plan. This included a modern kitchen with a window, facing east with a lovely view. The window lined up with the French doors to the balcony off the dining room. Later, an Armenian friend sent over one of his workmen to put up a screen, so the window could be opened for cross-ventilation with the dining room's French doors.

Directly behind the kitchen was a puzzlingly small bathroom. The very small bathtub had a built-in seat. I later learned that here good Muslims washed their hands, face, head, and feet before praying.

A hallway separated the kitchen from the large dining room that was adjacent to an equally large living room. These rooms were perfect for entertaining, and we made good use of them giving dinners and parties for our friends and colleagues.

The rest of the flat consisted of three bedrooms and the regular bathroom that occupied the east and north sides. Besides these inner rooms, there were three balconies, one at the rear off the kitchen, one off the dining room-living room, and another off the north side. We discovered the balcony off the dining room-living room was the perfect place for viewing the Hale-Bopp comet low on the southern horizon. After dinner in the evenings Mel and I often went out to watch its progress. We were lucky, because Hale-Bopp is a long period comet and won't be seen again until the year 4380. The neighbors probably wondered what those crazy Americans were doing on the balcony every night. Most Syrians believe all foreigners are spies, and we gladly offered them some proof.

Ab told us we would seldom catch sight of our same-floor neighbors, whose door was directly across from ours, but we didn't know why. One day when we opened our door, their door was opening, too. Two women, wearing the *hijab* and completely wrapped in long, black *abayahs,* and two men, one old and one young, emerged. The men quickly pushed the women back through the door. Mel and I said, "Good morning," but there was no answer. They ignored us. Some of our friends explained later that this family was a rigidly

traditional family that seldom allowed women to leave the house. It was obvious that they didn't like us. I believe they hadn't liked Ab either.

We also never met the couple who lived upstairs directly above us, but we did meet the other couple. It came about because I pulled a wrong cord and caused a small disaster. In the winter an oil furnace in the basement heated our flat, but when spring came with its warm days, I wanted to turn off the heat. We had forgotten what Ab told us about this process, or perhaps he hadn't told us. But it was too warm, and we wanted to save oil, having promised to refill the oil tank before leaving. I wanted the heat off, but neither of us knew know where the controls were or what they looked like. So, noticing a cord in the bathroom, I decided this must be the control, and I pulled it.

That evening when Mel and I came home from our jobs, one of the upstairs neighbors knocked on our door. He was very polite and friendly, and spoke a little English.

"You know about the hot water?"

"What about it?"

"It's on the roof. All those cisterns you see on top of houses. The sun heats the water."

In Syria the people took advantage of the heat of the sun for hot water. We had never thought about it, but it made sense. "Yes?" I said, beginning to suspect what I had done.

"You let out all the water for the building."

I began to apologize. Mel apologized. I was so sorry to do such a dumb thing. The neighbor was gracious. He even laughed. Then he showed us where to turn off the heat. "You must come to my house," he insisted and led us upstairs. It was obvious his wife was expecting us. She had made coffee, and there were four dishes of apricots set on the table. She spoke no English, but we were happy to meet such pleasant people who could forgive me for my ignorance, take us in and make us feel at home. They were typical of the warm, welcoming Syrian people who helped us at every turn. The reclusive, black-clad people across the hall were an anomaly in a rapidly modernizing nation.

We never met the other couple who lived upstairs, but we became good friends with the divorcee and her family who moved into the flat beneath ours. Zeena, two daughters, and a grade school boy all spoke English well. Zeena had lived in Germany as a child, and so she spoke German as well. In Syria a man could divorce his wife by saying in front of witnesses three times, "I divorce you." But it was practically impossible for a woman to get a divorce on any grounds. So everyone assumed a divorced woman had been discarded by her husband because she was a bad wife. Always the divorcee was at fault. Although we never learned anything about Zeena's former husband, we saw her as a loving mother to her children, and a diligent worker in a flower shop. She arranged artistic bouquets and grew beautiful plants. Her mother lived in Aleppo, and Zeena and the children lived with her before she moved into Ab's lower flat. Zeena had two sisters, but no brother. That meant when her father had died without a son, her mother could inherit only one eighth of his estate. The father's brothers inherited the rest of it. In this case. the uncles were good and generous and kept her mother in the old house well cared for.

I thought Zeena was the owner of the flower shop, but perhaps she was not. One morning when I went downstairs to talk with her, she was wearing her night dress as she went about morning chores, despite the fact there was a strange man sitting at the table finishing a cup of coffee. I asked no questions. After that I saw him there frequently, and I noticed that he worked in the flower shop. Maybe the flower shop was his and she worked for him. Later, when they decided to emigrate to Canada, she told me that to qualify for the Canadian visa, their emigration advisor had suggested that although they had been married in Aleppo, they should go to Damascus for another ceremony. I never understood the mysterious laws that required this.

Zeena was a good neighbor; it was so pleasant to have a woman to speak English with, and a woman who had lived in the West and understood our Western ways.

One day two women came to the front door of our apartment house with a hose. They proceeded to attach it and wash the foyer and the steps. I had not hired them, but I knew they wouldn't be doing this unless they were poor. I wanted to give them something for their work, but I was unsure of what would be right. I phoned Zeena, but she wasn't home. Then I remembered a pair of black leather pumps my daughter had left after a visit, when she had emptied her suitcases and packed them with the carpets she had bought. I took the shoes and a handful of money and offered them to the women, saying "*Shukran, Shukran*." To my astonishment, both fell to their knees and proclaimed their gratitude. A middle class, mid-western American, I did not expect such treatment, and I was embarrassed to have people kneeling before me. The only time we went to our knees at home was when my Methodist congregation knelt at the altar rail to receive communion. It was hard to persuade them to get up and carry their hose to another apartment house.

In large planters along the road on the north side of our building were roses. The local varieties of roses do well in Syria. Many of the streets in University had these rose planters. The many flowers made the area pleasant.

Opposite our dining-living room balcony was a grade school. There was a walkway between the public sidewalk and the school windows. We heard the students when they went out to recess or when they came in. One school day we heard nothing. Zeena told us there was a demonstration downtown, and all the children and their mothers were bused to it because the government had required all of them to attend.

There was a row of houses on the north side of our street. We did not know any of the residents, but we suspected a few of them were paid to report to the government about when we came and went and who visited us.

One day a pickup truck came to one of the houses and unloaded a pile of sleeping mats and a flock of plastic chairs. Soon another truck arrived with amplifiers that began blasting Muslim prayers out into the neighborhood twenty-fours a day for funeral observances. Men in the traditional *galabeyyas* began pouring into the area, some packed into the backs of dusty trucks. Zeena told us an important man had died and all his relatives, many from desert villages, were coming to show their respects and honor him. One day we watched one of the men hold down a living lamb on the sidewalk and butcher it. He was quick and careful, and he cleaned up afterwards, even washing the sidewalk. The lamb would be roasted for all the relatives at the funeral. The funeral prayers lasted for a week, and after seven days, the pickups returned for the mats, chairs and amplifiers. Soon the men in *galabeyyas* climbed into trucks to return home. They had taken part in the traditional rituals for the dead neighbor. The restored silence after the amplifiers departed was welcome. I suspect even our traditional Muslim neighbors were glad.

We frequently saw two other men on our street. They would park their white station wagon some distance away and walk up the sidewalk to our apartment house, which was on a dead end. There they would lean against doors and smoke their Marlboros nonchalantly, as if they were part of the neighborhood. The sight of this familiar car struck fear into the hearts of ordinary Aleppians, because everyone knew they were part of the notorious Makhabarat (General Intelligence Directorate), one of the sixteen different secret services the government of Syria employed to spy on Syrian citizens, foreigners, and each other. Of all these groups, the Makhabarat had the darkest reputation for ruthlessness. Mel and I weren't afraid because the Fulbright Commission did not send anyone into a country that was unsafe. We were pretty sure that sometimes the Mukhabarat followed us to protect us, but probably, they also reported our doings.

I believe our neighbors probably represented a cross-section of Syrian society — ultra conservative, a little bit Westernized, and rapidly becoming more Westernized. The ones who were watching us were benefiting financially from the Syrian government's paranoia about spies. I would like to know what those station wagon men really thought of us.

Aleppo was a large, old city, older than any U. S. city, including the native American Pueblos. For 9,000 years it has been on the banks of the Queiq River (sometimes called the Aleppo River). The University Quarter where we lived was part of the city's expansion, which had engulfed a nearby village. Most dwellings were simple one-story houses or duplexes. This was home to working-class and lower middleclass people. Once, a university student who knew us, a resident of the quarter, invited us into his living room. It had no Western furniture, but instead along the walls were benches covered with rugs, much the way the Arab tents of old would have been, except in the tents, there would be saddles, sacks of grain, and household goods along the sides, all covered with rugs.

The surrounded former village had included an outdoor market that still operated. Around the market was a row of store buildings, including the yogurt store, where I bought yogurt in a half gallon plastic bucket. It had no lid, but seeing that I was a Westerner, the kindly old man who took the money always carefully put a Kleenex over the top of mine.

A grocery store had barrels of chickpeas, lentils, rice and other staples. There was a shelf with Western dry cereals, including Kellogg's Corn Flakes. This is where I bought the big jars of apricot jam so thick with apricots that Mel and I agreed that it was the best apricot jam in the world. For breakfast I put this in my yogurt. Mel put yogurt in his jam.

The meat store featured the denuded tails of flat-tailed sheep hanging in the window on a string, much like a string of Christmas lights. This store sold only lamb and beef. The lamb chops were wonderful. I often went to the chicken store in another part of the city, where I bought chicken livers and gizzards that did not come with the rotisserie chicken from the street.

Adjacent to the University Quarter was the Medical Quarter where our Canadian friends, Mat and Margo, had their flat. From my observations, I surmised that the University Quarter was for upper middleclass people and the Medical Quarter for slightly richer folks. On the other side of town was the Christian Quarter, where our Armenian friends lived. It had been destroyed in the 1822 earthquake, then rebuilt, and many of its structures date from that rebuilding era. In the 1950's new apartment houses had been built there with modern kitchens and plumbing.

When Mel and I arrived in Aleppo, there was a great deal of construction in progress. About a mile from Ab's flat was another newer part of town, where luxury villas were going up. Our friend, Mr. Petro Gregorian was having one of these built. This new place had twisted pillars, an elaborate carving over the lintel, a marble fireplace in the living room, and strips of copper between the marble floor slabs. It was a lovely building, but his wife wouldn't move into it. She said she couldn't move away from her neighbors and her comfortable neighborhood. She may have known something we didn't know about the people who would be her neighbors in the new house.

In the streets, Syrians did not smile at strangers, and to us this was disconcerting. Syrians were so friendly and helpful. Everywhere we traveled they pointed out the way to the sites or helped us make the right change for purchases. But there were no smiles for strangers. I met two exceptions, both people I encountered on my way to and from the university.

The friendliest strangers I found were the family who lived in a one-stall garage only a few blocks from our flat. It was obvious they were very poor. The father's work was carrying blocks of stone to the cutters who were building the adjacent house. I assumed the garage home was part of his salary. A garage house for an employee and family was not unusual in areas with lots of construction. This family had three small children and a baby. The children played in the street. So did the baby. There was nowhere else. Fortunately, it was a quiet street. They always greeted me and smiled. I began buying tablets, pencils, colors and coloring books for them. The mother often came to the door and greeted me, also. One day after I had given them the left-over food from a faculty party, she made me understand that she wanted to have me as her guest. I noted two blocks of stone situated with a larger block between them. She gestured for me to sit down. Then she set two cups out on the larger stone block, went back into the garage and emerged with a steaming kettle of tea. I had only a few words of Arabic, and she had no English, but we had a delightful tea.

At this time in Syria, village people were coming into cities to take manual labor jobs. Farmers lived in villages and went out daily to tend their crops, but often their sons had to leave home and find other work. Thanks to modern medicine and the tradition of large families, frequently a small family farm could not be further divided for all the sons. The garage woman's husband was probably one of these "extra" sons.

The other strangers who smiled back at me were the men in a group of stone masons working on another house in the neighborhood. In Aleppo at this time, it was the law that all new construction, except government construction, must be made from the local white limestone. The new parts of Aleppo thus became truly a white city, as in the Arabic meaning "Aleppo," "white" or "milk." As I passed on my way to and from the university, I had been watching a very large house rise up stone by stone. It must have been the property of a rich man, because there were some twisted stone pillars waiting to be put in place. There were several intricately carved stones screens over a window — reminiscent of the window screens of the ancient harems.

A large gang of stone masons worked there every day. They cut the white limestone with electric saws to specific dimensions, so each stone could be fitted perfectly into the other stones on all its six sides. The front doorway was arched with white limestone set alternately with black basalt.

The electric saws spit up a great deal of stone dust, and the workers were covered with it, with white rings around their eyes. They did not wear protective glasses or masks. When Mel and I asked our medical friends about the effect of stone dust on their health, they told us the average stone cutter died at age 40-45. What a loss! To lose what was almost half a lifetime! The second year we were in Syria, with the help of one of the Junior Fulbrights, we were able to write a proposal to the World Health Agency in Switzerland for money and regulations for protective glasses and masks for these stone workers, but it wasn't approved. I am sure the World Health Agency had even greater needs for its money, but I can't help but wish a better life for those skillful artisans.

Intrigued by their work, I took some photographs of the masons at work. After they were developed, one morning on my way to my office, I brought them with me. I began to distribute the pictures to the workers, and finally, a man who must have been the foreman stepped forward. I put the last of all the photos in his hands and said, indicating the construction, "*Quais*," meaning beautiful. He repeated, "*Quais*, *yid am jamil"* (it is considered beautiful), and he added a great deal more in Arabic. He immediately stopped the usual work and barked some orders. He dusted off a stone and indicated that I should sit. Another stone was brought for a table, and then a worker brought a bottle of *mazoot* with a small ring on top and heated a teakettle of water. Workers brought out their cups. Apparently, they were used to regular tea breaks. The foreman directed the making of my tea, all the time, telling me something in Arabic. I didn't understand, but I was charmed and honored that such skilled people were delighted I recognized their art.

Syria was a developing country, and like most such countries, the poor were many. But in Syria

of 1996-98 no one starved, for once a month the government gave a voucher to each citizen for a free ration of rice, tea, and sugar. Flour for bread also was subsidized, so bread was very cheap.

Everyone in Syria also had enough to wear and a place to stay. On the Holy Days, good Muslims were supposed to give to the poor. Many people gave meat from their holiday meals. Another common gift was clothes. My garage-family mother proudly showed me the new dress she received for the *Eid* (end of Ramadan). People also had a place to stay. Family obligations were taken very seriously. In the whole two years that we lived in Aleppo and traveled frequently to Damascus, we never saw more than three or four beggars. There were no street people, no street children. When a mother died, leaving children, the father's mother or sisters took care of them. There was no adoption. Though I found much of Syrian family culture distasteful and the treatment of women abhorrent, I was especially impressed by the strictures, rarely broken, that insisted fathers must support their children. Families took care of their elderly as well.

Education was free to all, and students were required to stay in school through the 6th grade. Many developing countries had this rule, but in Syria it was strictly enforced. The President had been sent to school during the French Mandate over Syria, and he prized education. He had been in power since 1970, so when Mel and I arrived in 1996, 90% of the adult population was literate. University students living away from home could stay in the dormitories at a weekly rent of what amounted then to about thirty-five cents in U.S. currency.

Everyone in Syria had enough to eat, a place to live, a free education, and free medical care as well. Although Syria was a dictatorship with its hazards, the nation was doing quite a good job for its poor people. Still, the garage family was very poor, and the stone masons were dying too young.

While Syrians usually did not smile at strangers, still they were a most kind and considerate people. The first time we took a taxi in Aleppo, the driver, seeing we were strangers, invited us to his house for lunch. We had to decline, but the offer was so kindly given and so sincere, we were sorry not to go. We found out these invitations were common not only from taxi drivers. As the Western-educated Syrians in Aleppo learned we were in town, invitations came from people whom we had met just briefly. They wanted to get to know us and to feed us well on their wonderful cuisine. In a short time, we knew a number of physicians in Aleppo, as well as some business people. We were invited out to dinner, sometimes for every night of the week. Because I had to work so hard preparing new lectures at the university, we could accept only a few invitations.

Mel became famous throughout Aleppo. The kids at ICARDA school where he volunteered gave him a new local name. Because he was thin with silver hair, taller than most Syrian men and an American, he *had* to be Uncle Sam. The spread of his fame came from his riding a bicycle. Our friend Arno Gregorian had found and delivered the bike with a warning that no man of any importance would ride a bicycle. Bikes were for the poor. Mel had no such care for his dignity. He enjoyed his exercise, keeping in shape by swimming and riding. Besides he would not let our lack of a car confine him to the flat. Biking was more convenient than depending the somewhat random public transportation system of mini-vans that plied Aleppo's streets. And so, Mel achieved his fame. Everyone in Aleppo knew the eccentric American, called Uncle Sam, who rode a bicycle.

Another memorable example of the kindness and hospitality of ordinary Syrians came when one early evening a friend who was not the best driver brought us home from dinner at our favorite downtown restaurant. He took a corner too tight, hitting the curb and flattening his rear tire. We all got out and stood more or less helplessly. Soon two young Syrians in a passing car stopped and offered to help us. We showed them where the jack and spare tire were, and within a few minutes they had changed the tire, and put the flat and jack carefully in the back. Our friend pulled cash out of his pocket and insisted on paying them. But they laughed good-naturedly and declined. They were glad to help us.

Even the language barrier did not deter their helpfulness. People often sensed our confusion and came to our rescue. One evening I fell ill. I phoned my symptoms to a doctor friend, and she agreed with my self-diagnosis: bladder infection. She told me what to get. I didn't need a prescription, but I had to know the Latin name of the drug. I needed the medicine right away, so off we went to the pharmacy.

Inside the small nearby pharmacy, a group of men were socializing, obviously the pharmacist's friends. We had noticed other stores with an evening group, something like a regular club. I had written down the name of the medicine, and when I showed it to the pharmacist, he nodded in recognition of the universal Latin name. He fetched the medicine from his closet, and he told us the cost. We could not understand him. Everyone tried to help, but they had no English, and our smattering of Arabic failed us. So Mel held out some Syrian bills and small change. The friends counted out the right amount, and the pharmacist gave us some change. Laughing, the men carefully recounted the change, perhaps making a joke on the pharmacist. As we left, they

called down Allah's blessings on us. We responded as best we could, answering, "Allah, Allah."

My students, too, were very kind. One cold winter afternoon, my class was moved to another building on campus. We found ourselves in an large and very cold auditorium with a row of open windows near the high ceiling, far too high for anyone in the room to reach. They welcomed in the gray, damp cold of Syrian winter. Soon I was shivering. I needed a janitor with a long stick. I struggled to remember the different British word that Syrians used for "janitor." I looked in the hallway, but no one was in sight. When I returned, three young men came to the lectern, offering their warm jackets. One said he would try to find a porter. "Porter!" that was the word, the British word for janitor. There I was, an English speaker, needing translation for an English word! Soon a porter with a long stick arrived and shut all the windows. I told the students I thought Syrians were the kindest people in the world.

Although the Arab people of Syria were overwhelming in their kindness and concern for the stranger in their midst, there were some whose political hatred for Americans would override their usual kindness. Mel and I were fortunate to encounter few of these.

Animals in Syria

Syria had no zoos when Mel and I were there, and we never saw any animals in the wild, although the jerboa, a desert animal somewhat like American chipmunks, lived in the desert, as did the desert fox. However, Syria has a long history with wild animals. In ancient times, the Egyptian pharaohs had come to Syria to hunt lions, alas, long since extinct there. The desert onager, a species of wild donkey, is also extinct.

Some domestic animals were plentiful, but we seldom saw dogs. We were told that the Muslim religion considered dogs unclean. The first time we saw a dog, we were traveling on a highway past a dumping ground. There were two, black and tan, lean, sniffing about the garbage. Later when we were looking for our second flat to rent, we met a young Christian man who kept two large, white dogs. Wagging their tails, they seemed friendly enough, but their barks were loud and aggressive. He said that his neighbors complained because they barked so much, at sparrows, at the sound of nearby traffic, morning, noon and night. Because he owned the duplex, there was nothing his neighbors could do about it, and he seemed pleased with his right to keep what was an anathema to the society around him. We thought it wrong and self-defeating to antagonize his Muslim neighbors, and we were glad the flat did not suit us. We did not relish living next to loud dogs or among people who might associate us with this fellow Christian.

Although there were few dogs, there were hundreds, maybe thousands of feral cats in Aleppo. They were everywhere, and especially around the open garbage dumpsters on many street corners. These dumpsters were a smorgasbord for rats, who were meals for cats of every stripe and hue. The cats were invariably lean, and all of them seemed to have infected eyes. Still they were community assets. We wondered why they were so lean. Because there were so many of them? Genetics? We never knew anyone who had a cat for a pet. Did they have a bad reputation? Were pets a luxury where so many people were poor? We did not solve these mysteries.

We had expected to see camels in Syria — didn't half the Christmas cards we received each holiday season depict the three wise men on camels? As it turned out, we never saw a one. People did not keep dogs, cats or camels, but horses were a different matter.

Almost every morning we would hear the clop, clop of horses' hooves, as the farmers from the adjoining villages brought fresh vegetables and fruit into the city. These horses were usually old, and did not appear related to the much prized Arabian horses. Once on my way home from the

university, I found an old man in front of a dumpster, pulling out the bags of garbage, tearing them open, and spreading the contents out on the street for his bony, spavined old horse. Obviously both of them were very poor. I wished I had a barn so I could take the horse home to a manger of good hay and corn on the cob in his feed box.

The most important domestic animal in Syria was, of course, the Arabian Horse. One friend from the English Department, Dr. Rami, had written a book in English about Arabian horses, which was circulated by the American Arabian Horse Society. When we met one of the professors of Veterinary Medicine from the University of Homs, we learned that in Syria veterinary medicine was Arabian Horse medicine, though Syrian vets also treated sheep, goats, and dairy cows. Though the horses in the streets seemed mainly old and hard-worked, we also saw wonderful Arabian horses when Dr. Hannah, my university officemate and her husband, Rushie, invited Mel and me to accompany them to the stable where their daughters took riding lessons.

I was interested in horses because we had them on the farm where I grew up. Our neighbor boys had riding horses, and they frequently brought them to our place, so my sisters and I could ride with them on the country roads. We had no riding horses, but my father used work horses to farm until 1942, when he switched to tractors. Our work horses were enormous and strong. The most important pair were matched strawberry roans, Shorty and Duke. They had hard work in every season except winter. They pulled the plow in the fall, the disk and the harrow in the spring to ready the fields for planting, then the corn planter, and as the corn grew, a corn plow to kill the weeds between the rows. In summer they were hitched to the hay wagons, and, also, pulled the rope that released the hay fork's big load of hay into the barn's mow, and finally in fall, before plowing, they pulled the wagons when Dad and the hired man picked the ears of corn. Dad took special care of our horses and always treated them kindly, and he expected everyone else to do the same.

When Dr. Hannah took us to their stable, we saw some magnificent Arabians. We learned that at this same stable Basil al-Assad, the President's oldest son and heir-apparent, had kept his horses. Everyone in the country knew how Basil loved horses. He was a prize-winning equestrian. Pictures of him and a friend, Princess Haya of Jordan, who also competed in equestrian tournaments, show them on their impressive Arabians. Mahmoud told us that Basil had a reputation as a playboy, and that he had once seen him with a table of beautiful girls at Aleppo's Hotel Cham restaurant.

Though deceased, Basil was a familiar figure in Aleppo. After midnight on a foggy morning in 1994, while driving his Mercedes, perhaps as fast as 150 mph, Basil collided with a barrier and died instantly. Wild rumors about his death still circulated in 1996, mostly speculating that it was a political killing in revenge for his father's cruelty and corruption. An equestrian statue was erected to him in Aleppo, and there still were banners picturing him all over the city and hanging in most stores. We saw billboards of the President with the dead Basil and the new heir apparent, his second son, Bashar. A joke about these pictures, told surreptitiously, was that they were "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost." Had Basil been riding a horse instead of in his high-horsepower car, he would still be living.

The Gregorians

Main Persons

Petro Gregorian (Mr. Petro), an Armenian businessman.

Anil Gregorian (Mrs. Anil).
Their children were
Arno, in business with his father.
Sophia, an M.D. interning at the Children's Hospital.
Marie Anna, an M.D. interning as a pediatrician at the Children's Hospital.

Mrs. Helena, Anil Gregorian's best friend.

Mr. George, Mrs. Helena's husband, an Armenian businessman.

Amir, a Syrian graduate of Coe College.

Miriam, married Amir and immigrated with him to the U.S. Her father was "The General."

There were many international students at Coe College in the 1990s, with a good-sized group from the Middle East. Several were outstanding, including a brother, Amir, and sister, Nejla, from Syria. They urged me to visit Syria, describing its hospitality and fascinating places. When they extolled the beauty and charm of their home, I wasn't hard to convince, because I had long been interested in their land of history and adventure. My desire to know more had grown during a brief visit to the Middle East when I won a Malone Fellowship in 1994.

When Amir was a student at Coe, he was in love with a beautiful Syrian girl who had been teaching in Aleppo. As soon as he graduated, he rushed home to marry her and bring her back to Cedar Rapids where he had been recruited into a good job with a local company that did a great deal of business in the Middle East. Amir was their ideal candidate, a native speaker of Arabic with an American business degree.

A few weeks after the couple returned from their wedding, they invited us for dinner. Amir's wife, Miriam, was a beautiful woman who spoke good English, and even better from Mel's point of view, she cooked a wonderful Syrian meal. I had been praising Syrian cooking to Mel, who loved good food. I knew he would enjoy the Mediterranean cuisine, influenced by Syria's proximity to Turkey's spices and also by the French during the long protectorate after World War I. Miriam showed me their apartment and told us all their news. She told us about the Gregorian family, with whom she had lived while she was teaching in Aleppo. She promised to contact them, so they could welcome us when we arrived. This turned out to be especially fortuitous. We knew that having locals to help us get settled would be a big advantage. We didn't know then just how valuable and enduring this friendship would be.

As promised, Miriam had contacted the Gregorians. After our orientation by American diplomats, as we awaited our transportation to Aleppo, Mr. Petro Gregorian telephoned the American diplomat in charge of the Fulbrights in Syria, Gillian. I was at her office in the American Center at the embassy when his call came in. Gillian began speaking to him in Arabic, but I soon heard Mr. Petro say, "Speak English." He was commenting, I am sure, on Gillian's Arabic. I chuckled a little to myself, but I shouldn't have — given how little I had managed to learn from my tapes and book. Her accent might have bothered Mr. Petro, because in 1996 most Americans who spoke Arabic had learned it in Cairo, where the accent was different from Syria's. He gave her his phone number, and she wrote it down for me.

When it came time to leave Damascus for Aleppo, Gillian phoned Mr. Gregorian to let him know we were on the way. When we arrived, we found that he had sent word to our Aleppo hotel to say his son, Arno, would meet us the next day and, later, he would help us hunt for what turned out to be an elusive furnished flat. The next morning, when we descended the stairs to meet Arno, we were surprised to discover that the stair risers did not have equal dimensions. We had to watch every step. This early morning stairs surprise became symbolic of much of our subsequent life in Aleppo.

Arno was a handsome young man about college age, and he spoke excellent English. He was not in college, but worked with his father and uncle, who imported, sold and maintained electrical generators. Because they were prospering, the family had a large flat in the old Christian section of town. Arno took us to meet his family before beginning our search for a home.

At the Gregorian's flat we were introduced to Mr. Petro, an overweight middle-aged man, gracious and friendly, his short, plump wife, Mrs. Anil, and their two girls, both medical students who had just received their degrees and were now interning at the local Children's Hospital. Mr. Petro offered us a drink, which we declined. His wife, Mrs. Anil, bought him a cloudy drink, new to us, that he called "my milk." It was the very potent ouzo, a clear liquid until water is added, and it turns milky white. Then the pistachios were passed. We were to find out that Mr. Petro always kept a bowl of pistachios on the coffee table. We were warmly welcomed, and the first meal we had together included Mrs. Anil's brother, a doctor educated in France, and his wife, their little

children, a daughter and plump little boy. The food was a sumptuous example of the Syrian cuisine.

During the meal there was friendly banter between Arno, and his youngest sister, Marie Anna. She was asking Arno to let her drive his car. He teased her about women drivers. In Aleppo, I almost never saw a woman driving, although they legally could, unlike in Saudi Arabia. It was unusual for a family to have two cars. Many people, even professionals and businessmen, did not drive.

The older sister, Sophia, was taller and heavier than her spritely younger sister. She was thoughtful and smiled frequently. The young people were all very good looking. The girls had lovely, long black hair — and I began to think all Syrian young people were as handsome as these three.

Later we would meet Mr. Petro's brother, Mr. Serge, a partner in the generator business, and his wife, Amana. Mr. Serge and Mr. Petro spoke quite good English, but Mrs. Amana never spoke at all, although she understood a lot of English. Mr. Serge and Mr. Petro traveled to Sweden and Italy twice a year to buy and import generators. As in many developing countries, the unreliable electrical grid required that many entities have their own generators. Hospitals, government and military installations had to be able to communicate and maintain their services.

The Gregorians were of Armenian ancestry and were very Westernized. They ate with silverware, not with their hands from a common dish, as we later learned was the custom of many local people. Like us, they thought in political terms of democracy, although they were acutely aware that Syria, although it had the outward trappings of democracy, was actually a dictatorship. They were interested in history and were anxious to help us see historic Syria. Their college-age kids reminded us of our own children who were only a few years older. The Gregorians were helpful, kind, and fun-loving — ideal friends. We were so lucky to have known Amir and Miriam and, so, to meet the gracious Gregorians.

Soon after our arrival, Mr. Petro sent Arno to help us find a flat. He drove us to the Christian Quarter of town where his family lived. On the way he explained that the new mosque, not far from their home, had been built in the last year, although for years, perhaps centuries, there had been no local mosque. However, some Muslims lived in the quarter, some of them for many years. Because the Quran specifies that there must be a mosque near every group of Muslims, the local Muslim leaders demanded that the City Council give them permission to build in the Christian Quarter. The Christians did not want a mosque in their immediate vicinity, because of the loud broadcasts of prayers that began at sunrise and continued four other times a day. In Mohammed's time, the muezzin stood in the minaret and gave the call to prayers, but all modern mosques had installed enormous amplifiers that scorched the air at prayer times. The new mosque reminded the Christians that they were a minority, surrounded by a Muslim majority that included a growing number of extremists, here and throughout the Arab world.

There were few furnished flats in the quarter for Arno to show us. Those we saw were small and in old buildings, and, important to us, they had outdated kitchens. It was obvious that Arno expected that we would live in the Christian Quarter. When I asked about the distance to the university and the means of getting there, Arno said it was seven kilometers and pointed out a nearby bus stop. "It goes to the east gate of the university," he said. The bus parked there had its destination displayed above the windshield, but it was written in Arabic. I imagined coming to that stop and finding other buses with other Arabic destinations above their windshields. What if I took the wrong bus? Seven kilometers was too far to walk regularly.

Arno was a kind, thoughtful young man. He was trying to be helpful, and I'm sure he did his best, but I really hoped to find a place within walking distance to the university. The Christian Quarter was too far away.

Mrs. Helena Tells a Story

The Armenian community in Aleppo stuck together, and for good reasons. Though the Gregorians and their Armenian friends had lived in Syria for nearly a century, they remained foreigners in a sort of exile. They were among the Christian minority in an Arab country, and although there was not supposed to be any discrimination, the old patterns remained. Other friends told us of a native Aleppian neighbor who had studied engineering in Russia; he told them, "The Christians are doing too well. It shouldn't be allowed." The Christians were tolerated, but their minority position was problematic.

One reason the Armenians Christians prospered was that their cultural traditions had always stressed education and the arts, including painting and music. Their church sanctuary walls were covered with icons of all the saints and many saintly Armenian personages that perhaps Mrs. Helena and Mrs. Anil recognized, though they were strangers to Mel and me.

Mrs. Helena said Armenians always had at least one musical instrument in their house. To prove it, she produced an old family violin which she thought might be a famous Stradivarius. When our daughter, an accomplished violinist, visited,

she determined that it really was a good practice violin.

Armenians produced many skilled designers of gold jewelry, and there were several Armenian-owned jewelry shops in Aleppo. When we took our daughter to one of the artist's shops, she found that she could have an exquisite, one-of-a-kind bracelet, necklace, or pin for a little less than it would cost at home in Texas. This was not because the Armenians sold gold for less than world market value, but because they designed and made their own jewelry.

One Sunday at the Gregorians, we were served another of their sumptuous noon feasts, ending with a delicate flan. Afterward, we relaxed in their living room: Mr. Petro, Mrs. Anil, Mr. George and Mrs. Helena. We were almost too satisfied to talk. I contemplated a picture of the Virgin Mary hanging behind Mrs. Anil's chair. It was a lovely picture, a lovely day; we were among good friends, comfortable and safe. After a silence, Mr. George mentioned a Russian woman who was in the news and a subject of gossip in Aleppo because she had become a celebrity miracle. She was one of the many poor women of Russia who were coming to Syria as prostitutes, and she had suddenly developed stigmata, the five holy wounds of Christ's crucifixion.

"The bleeding comes and goes," Mr. Petro said. "It's a miracle."

"Her husband, if he is her husband, will let people come to see her." Mr. George said. "They will take only enough money to pay their rent and buy their food."

"Why her?" Mrs. Anil asked. "Why her, who had not been a believer?"

"We don't know," Mr. Petro said, "There's so much we don't know."

"Maybe it's another miracle," Mrs. Helena said. "I believe in miracles. I'm here because my family had a miracle. Let me tell you the story."

Mrs. Helena's Miracle

This began in Turkey, during the Terror in 1915-16. At the end of the 19th century there were millions of Armenians in neighboring Turkey. Armenia has always been a poor country, so it was easier to find jobs across the border. Turkey was a Muslim country, and the Armenians were Christians, as were the Greeks who also worked there. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Turkish government began a program of turning the country into a theocracy. It became their official policy to get rid of the Christians. Sometimes Turkish troops went into a village and converted its inhabitants on pain of death. Sometimes they took the children away and gave them to Muslim families who converted them. Later, the government decided to expel or murder all Christians. This became the first genocide.

Turkish troops arrived in Sis, a southern village on the Mediterranean, on June 23rd, 1915. They herded all the Armenians into the town square. Then they lined up all the men, old and young, even all the boys who were twelve years old and older. They marched them down to a ravine. The women cried and begged, but the commander laughed at them. Then the shots and the screams. The women wailed and wept.

Then the women begged on their knees, "Let us bury our dead!"

"March!" the Turkish commander yelled.

The women looked at each other. What could they do? The Turkish troops ran into their midst, pushing and knocking some of them over in the dust.

"Get out of Turkey, infidel!' the commander shouted.

These Armenians were poor. That had no cars or trucks. They lived in town, so they had no horses and wagons.

"Walk, walk!"

They were afraid. They had heard of other towns where the troops killed the men and captured the Armenian women. Some of these women were stripped naked and displayed in a Damascus slave market. Some were sold as sex slaves in other towns. Some of their buyers, returning to their home countries from the Hajj, took their purchases as far away as Algeria and Tunisia.

The women also had heard that women and children from other towns were seeking refuge in Lebanon where a large Christian population would take them in. They were confused, mourning, crying, terrorized. How could this happen in Sis, where they had lived in peace beside their Muslim neighbors for centuries?

Among these women was Mrs. Marie, who trembled and sobbed in the street, her two sons, Antonius, five, and Georgie, four, clinging to her in terror. Her husband, Raymon, would be coming home from work now, if times were normal. But he would never return from work again. One of her Muslim neighbors brought from her little house a bundle with bread and olives and a pot of yogurt. She pressed these into Mrs. Marie's hands. Then these three joined the long line of the bereft marching toward Lebanon.

The boys did not understand what had happened.

"When will Dad catch up and help us?" Antonius asked.

"It's awful," she managed to say, "awful." She couldn't bear to say the words — "shot" … "dead." They hastened down the dusty road.

"Mamma, I'm thirsty," Georgie said.

"I don't like this,' Antonius said

"The next little stream," she said, "we'll stop."

Fortunately, they soon came to a little stream that emptied into the sea. Marie scooped up a handful of water, checking to make sure it was not salty from the incoming tide.

"Mamma, we have no cup." Antonius said.

She kneeled, bent over and scooped water in her hands. "This way," she said. "It will be fun." She noticed some watercress and hurriedly snapped some off while the boys scooped water, drank, and then flicked drops at each other.

"Come," she said. "We have to hurry."

Her heart hurt, but she would save these boys, the last remnants of her family. She tried not to remember the stricken look on her husband's face as he was led away. Her eyes hurt. Her feet hurt. Her memories hurt. But there was no time, only urgency. The sun was hot. How far until the road turned south to Lebanon? How far after that? The Turkish troops would come after them. The soldiers were young and could move faster than this string of mourning women and children.

When it was time for the noon meal, the column didn't stop. They were hungry. Marie untied her bundle and took out a piece of bread for each of them. "We'll eat as we go along."

Marie doled out the bread and yogurt carefully, not knowing if anyone else along the way would give them food. She picked some edible plants along the road. The boys did not like them very much, and when the day's portion of bread was gone, they cried for it. It hurt her heart that she couldn't feed them a real meal.

"I'm tired," Georgie said.

"I'm tired, too." she said. "But we have to hurry."

"The bad men are after us," Antonius said.

"Yes. Hurry faster." So, he knew something, part of it. They would have to be told. How could she say it?

She trudged on, carrying her wounded heart, unable to stop reliving the vision of her husband marching off to a ravine with the other village men. She prayed; she prayed with every step. Though she cried silently, tears streaked her face. While the boys skipped ahead and couldn't hear, she murmured, calling to the husband who had been alive that morning. "Oh, Raymon, Oh Raymon."

At night they lay down beside the road, praying the Turkish army wouldn't come in the dark. In the morning, many people could not get up. They had no shovels or spades to bury them. They could only say hasty prayers and leave them. This hurt more than the lack of food, to leave the beloved beside the road for the foxes and wolves, as carrion for the hawks that kept watch above the miserable column.

Sometimes it was too far to the next stream of water. The babies and smaller children cried. The women wept for their dead and for fear of the hostile army following fast behind, herding them to the border. The column walked along as fast as they could. But some were very slow, helping an old, lame grandmother, or a young child, or two or three young children.

Another night they sat down beside the road. Marie was so tired. The boys wanted to pick up pebbles and play. She persuaded them to drink from a pool beside the road. She unwrapped her bundle and gave them the sprigs of watercress. Antonius cried. "I don't like greens, I want *labum*." She was not home in her little stone house where she kept the buttermilk in the narrow well her husband had dug deep in one corner of the floor. In the mornings she lowered the bottle of buttermilk on ropes to keep it cool. Now she could give them nothing except the last two pieces of flatbread. She wasn't hungry, she told herself.

An old woman, whom she had never seen before threw herself on the grass beside them. She reached into her pocket and gave Marie a radish. Marie bit it in two and was handing a piece to each boy when the woman stopped her and said, "They don't like radish. You must keep your strength." She looked at the boys. Georgie had already fallen asleep. Antonius' head was nodding. She began to eat the radish. She turned back to say "Thank you," but the old woman had vanished.

In the morning Marie was surprised to find three pieces of flatbread in her pocket. Georgie did not want to wake up. When she felt his forehead, it was too warm. She felt his little hands. Too warm. "Oh God, no. No!"

"It must have been the water,"' she heard someone say.

Then Antonius opened his eyes. She checked his forehead and hands. They were okay.

Others were awakening and starting again on the long, dusty road. The old woman with the radishes saw Marie beside the boys. "*Yallah, yallah*, they are coming after us."

Marie picked up Georgie. The old woman helped to put him on Marie's back and Antonius took his mother's hand. They started out again.

Not everyone got up. Marie heard terrible weeping and the awful ululations for the dead. As with their sons and husbands, there was neither means nor time to bury the old, the lame, the sick who had died. There was no priest in his stiff embroidered cassock brought from Armenia, holding the gold cross, to recite the burial prayers. There was only the enormous urgency — to save those they could.

At first Georgie did not seem heavy on her back. At noon the column paused. When Marie let slip the burden from her back, his little face was no longer hot, no longer warm. He was gone.

The old woman appeared again to help Marie lay him out in the grass. Because they didn't have coins, they found pebbles to close his eyes. They

folded the arms across his chest. Marie kissed the child's hands, the little mouth.

They laid him beside the road in a line with the others who had taken their last steps. It seemed to Marie that everyone in the ragged column was crying. Weeping made the music of their march. And they prayed, too, as they dragged themselves along, for the dead, for deliverance, prayers for strength. How to endure the unendurable? The old woman reached into her pocket and took out a handful of grapes for Marie and Antonius, and again she vanished.

In another Turkish village, the first thing after breakfast, Ramadan Khaled went out to check on his olive orchard, walking along with the other village men to their fields. It was only June, and the olives wouldn't be ripe for harvest until September, but he would check the little green nibs and think ahead to the days when they would be plump and full of sweet golden oil. Everyone in the village knew that he had the best orchard and that he made the best oil.

Everyone in the village also talked about his family of five girls. The village women said among themselves, "Poor Ram. Only girls. No sons." The men gossiped too. He knew sometimes they laughed behind his back. "Girls — something is wrong with Ram — he can get only girls. He will have a hard time finding husbands for so many." They said nothing to his face. Ram was the best wrestler in the village.

As he walked along the road to his orchard he saw another of the rag-tag strings of refugees from Turkey stumbling along. Those Christians had been coming for several weeks, hungry women, dirty children, and all so sad. The Turkish army was chasing them, but not always trying hard to catch them. Ram thought today the army was a long way behind. He felt sorry for the poor women and the children. Basilah, his wife, made a pot of lentil stew and took it to the people on the road every night. She, too, had a soft heart.

He was moved to pray as he passed a row of bodies stretched out along the road. They were not asleep, but laying in the final sleep of the dead. The Turkish governor said the Armenians and all the dirty Christians were traitors, allied with the Russians. Looking at all those bodies of women and children, he did not believe that. His prayers were for them, and for himself. Lost in thought, he did not hear them in time to avoid the company of soldiers that came over a hill. They shouted at him and the other village men walking out to their fields.

"Pick them up before they rot!" the Commander ordered.

The first body he came to was a small boy. "So little," Ram thought, and he picked him up. In his arms the child murmured, and Ram started. Was this a jinn? Were his ears deceived? He wasn't sure he had heard anything. But when the child's eyes fluttered, Ram shushed him quickly. He wouldn't let the soldiers know the child was still alive. He carried his light burden down to the ravine where the bodies were being dumped. Once out of the commander's sight, he took out his water flask, and put it to the child's mouth and gave him a sip. "Not too much, little bird," he whispered. "I don't know when last you had water."

Carrying the child, he walked along the ravine away from the bodies and the commander. Then he hurried across the fields, back to his house. He whispered, "Don't die, little bird. We will soon be home. You'll see. Mama will take care of you. I won't let anything hurt you." The child's hand closed.

Basilah knew something must be wrong when she saw Ram coming across the field. She was at the door to meet him. He put little bird down on a mat. Basilah stroked his forehead, put her head down to his chest and listened. "Alive," she said. "*Yallah*," she said, and she jumped up, blew on the coals, and heated a little milk in a pan, sweetening it with a spoonful of honey. It warmed quickly. She poured it in a cup, then lifted his head gently and held it to his mouth.

"Drink, little bird," she said. He took a sip, then two.

"It's good," Ram said. "He lives." The child took a big gulp. Ram and Basilah laughed.

"Not so fast," Ram said. "You must learn to drink again."

"You must learn to live again," Basilah said. The child smacked his lips. They laughed again.

"We have a son. Allah has sent a son for this house. He will have my father's name. He is called Yusef."

Basilah smiled. "'Now you are Abu Yusef."

"You are Um Yusef,"

The five daughters were delighted. Their friends had teased them because they had no brothers. But now, a brother, a brother! When he was better, they would walk him around the village and show him off. They had a little boy to play with. They could take him walking with them. Girls weren't supposed to go out without the company of a man from the family.

At first the village gossiped, but Ram and Basilah just smiled. The boy was so good-natured. He laughed a lot, played all the childhood games in the dust with the other boys, and smiled a mischievous smile at even the most sour old woman in the village. True, his skin was pale, and his hair was brown, not black like the village boys, but everyone became used to his differences. He followed Ram everywhere and helped with the farm work. He grew tall and strong. He was especially helpful at the olive press where he could coax the old donkey to do his donkey duty

and pull around the upper stone that crushed the ripe olives and pits against the lower stone to make the mast. After they had kneaded the mast, they put it in woven flails and stacked them. Then Ram and Yusef lifted the heavy stones, placing them on the stacks to weigh them down for twenty-four hours of pressure.

One day Ram said to Basilah, "Yusef must be about eighteen years. We should find him a wife."

"Most of the village boys and girls are engaged already," Basilah reminded him. In their village these arrangements were made at birth.

"We are late," Ram said. "But there should be no problem. He is strong. He is a good worker. He will inherit the farm."

"I will look at the girls when I go to the *haman* tomorrow"'

The *haman*, the village bath house, was open to women only one day a week. All the women and girls went to the *haman* for their baths, hair wash, and for massage. There Basilah would look over the eligible girls. Yusef's girl must not be silly, Basilah thought, or mean. She must be strong, so she can work and produce many children. She smiled to herself. Yusef would want a beautiful wife, too. She would look around and see what she could see, but she must hurry, she hadn't told any of them, but she knew her days were numbered. Her breath came in little puffs now. Sometimes she had to stop and stand still or even sit down before regaining her breath. This was a bad sign.

One day, as Ram and Yusef were working at the olive press, a strange merchant from Beirut came to sample their oil. The stranger noticed that Yusef was taller than the other village men, as tall as himself. He spoke some words that Ram didn't understand, but Yusef looked at him in wonder and answered, "Georgie Cambarian." He didn't know why he said these words or where they came from. Were they from an old story?

For a moment, the three men were silent, Yusef and Ram both confused by the question and answer that neither understood. Was this a dream?

Then the stranger reached out and embraced Yusef, and he burst into tears. Through his tears came more words in his strange tongue, and then he was laughing and crying both. He was saying: "Thank God, Thank God!"

Ram's heart felt squeezed, and he was afraid.

"Where did you get him?" the stranger demanded in Arabic.

What could he say? Everyone in the village had heard that the Turkish troops had kidnapped many Armenian children and gave them to Turkish families. But this is not what had happened to Yusef. Allah had given Yusef to him and Basilah. Thanks to Allah, they had saved him from death.

"He's my son."

"He doesn't look like you — and he speaks Armenian. I asked him his name, and he said Georgie. That's no Arabic name. It's Armenian. Where did you get him?" The stranger glared.

"From the roadside. He was dead. I saved him and brought him home."

"Is this true?" the stranger demanded of Yusef.

How could he answer? Yusef's thoughts were in turmoil. This was too much too fast. There were memories of hunger and walking and of a woman and another boy, but they were not clear.

"I don't remember. It was long ago. I was sick."

"You don't look like an Arab. You look like me!"

"No, I am of this village. This is my father."

The stranger said, "I must bring you to Beirut with me. Our mother has been crying for you all these years."

Yusef bristled. "No! My mother is here, in this house."

The stranger said to Ram, "You know he's Armenian. How can you keep him?"

"He doesn't want to go," Ram said, clenching his fists. "I found him left for dead. Basilah and I, *we* brought him back to life. Allah gave us a son. *He belongs with us*." Ram glared defiance, but there were tears too. He felt sympathy for the man he knew had found his long-lost brother. Yusef tried to glare, too, but he also felt the tugging memories of another mother and a brother. And tears were in his eyes.

At last the stranger's face softened, too. He had found his brother, but the men before him were also father and son. Finally, he said, "I'll go to Beirut and bring our mother. He'll know his real mother, his first. She will rejoice. She thought he was dead. I believed he was dead. *But he's alive*. Thank God." And then the stranger left.

After that day, Ram was troubled. Basilah and her two unmarried daughters whimpered, "What are we going to do?"

Yusef was the most troubled at all. On one hand he knew he looked less like his father, Ram, and more like the light-skinned, brown-haired stranger who claimed to be his brother. And the most vivid memories of his early childhood were of playing in the sand outside the door of Ram's house. The stranger's language was uncanny — familiar and yet not really his own. He did not want the stranger to return. He did not want to change.

And what if the stranger was right? Was he born an infidel? Would he have to go into exile among them? become an infidel? Would he be compelled to leave his mother who loved him and his father, who was so good and patient, who had always let him work beside him even when he was too young and didn't know how to do the farm

work. He did not want to think about that other woman who might be his mother. "Why did she leave me beside the road? A good mother could not do that. But what if she were afraid of the Turkish troops?" He had seen their cruelty — pushing anyone they saw into the dirt and picking the fruit off the trees along the way, eating a bite and then tossing it in the road so nobody could have it. Had they spoiled his first family in the same way?

One day, while Yusef continued to turn over such thoughts, Basilah announced they would pay a visit to the Abdullah family. "We go tonight," Basilah stated, and she sighed. The sharp pain in her side was worse. She wanted the marriage arranged as quickly as possible. Though she hoped a marriage would bind Yusef to their village, she wanted more to see him settled and loved and cared for before she would die.

Yusef knew the Abdullah's daughter, and he didn't find her attractive. Akila had a loud laugh and bold eyes, and she swished when she walked. That night when it was time to pay their visit, Basilah found she couldn't walk. She lay down and could not get up. She sighed and breathed one last heavy sigh.

The family did what they must. The daughters came. They tore their clothes and mourned. Before the next sundown, they were obligated to wrap her in a white sheet and take her to the cemetery. When all was ready, Yusef helped carry her to her grave.

A month later the stranger from Beirut returned, bringing with him an old woman and two sombre men wearing long black cassocks. Large crosses hung from their necks. They looked forbidding.

Now the stranger spoke to Yusef kindly: "This is your mother, Georgie." She was frail and walked with a cane.

The woman looked at him and said, tearfully, but joyfully, "Just like his father."

After a while, Antonius said, "You are of our family. You must come home to live with us."

Now Yusef knew what to say. "I have a father here who needs me. I am the only son. I know how to press the olives. We make the best olive oil in the province, probably in all of Turkey. You know it's the best."

"You can do many things in Beirut. Your mother needs you."The old woman looked at him beseechingly.

"I will think about it," Yusef said. In his heart, he understood that his brother and his first mother knew him. But it couldn't be right that he should leave his home. He was not ready to be her son.

For three years, Yusef thought, until one day Ram took sick, and he died after a few days. Soon after, Antonius came again. "It's time," he said. "We are your family in Beirut."

And so Yusef-Georgie went to Beirut to stay with his first family. He married an Armenian girl. But he never could feel that the Beirut family was really his family.

Mrs. Helena said. "This is the story of my grandparents. Other Armenians came here at different times, from different villages. The grandparents of my husband George came to Aleppo from Gazi Antip during that terrible time. The Syrian people took them in, fed them, clothed them, found places for them to live. So much cruelty, but so many good people, too. I'm very grateful. Thank God for all the goodness."

For centuries, Aleppo had welcomed many displaced and victimized peoples who brought with them much anguish and sorrow. The Armenians of Aleppo thought of themselves as the last great wave of refugees. Annually on April 24th, the Day of Remembrance, they commemorated the genocide their grandfathers' generation had suffered.

All the Armenians of Aleppo were the children and grandchildren of these refugees. The stories of their relatives' escapes from Turkey were vivid in their memories. Although Syria's laws prohibited discrimination, still there was animus against Christians. In this third generation as well the Christian community of Aleppo felt it was living on the edge, and that its protections could disappear at any moment as they had on 24 April 1915. Therefore, they remained always on the alert. In 1996-98, Christians were a minority, about twenty percent of the population of Aleppo. They maintained a close community; they worked together, and supported each other's businesses, and their children married each other.

Connections

Through our old friends Amir and Miriam and our new friends the Gregorians, we met several influential Syrians, including an archbishop, an admiral, and a general.

The Archbishop

One Sunday our phone rang insistently. Since we were new to Aleppo and knew very few people, we thought it was some relative from the States. But, no, it was Mr. Petro, "Where are you? The Archbishop is here, and you were supposed to come for dinner." We obviously had not understood his prior invitation. Although he spoke good English, sometimes his accent or choice of words confused us. "I'll send Arno for you." We realized this must be very important.

The Gregorian's flat was on the main floor, and they owned a flat and a garden beneath,

where the dinner guests had gathered. Several fruit trees were espaliered against the garden wall, and in the middle was a small grape arbor. The Archbishop of the Armenian Orthodox Church, a man near middle age wearing a black cassock, was seated on a bench beneath the vines. He rose when we entered and greeted us in accented English. He told us he had studied in California, and he was anxious to go back there. There is a large and vital Armenian population in Southern California. I could see why he wanted to go there, where his religion was accepted as one of many, and where he didn't have to be anxious about what the most rabid traditionalist Muslims would do to him if they could.

So many of the locals we met had voiced their hope to go to America, apparently an almost universal hope. I often heard it from my University of Aleppo students, especially the young men. Almost always when we took a taxi, the driver voiced this wish, and once in Damascus one driver promised us $10,000 if we could get him a visa. We always dismissed such pleas because we had absolutely no power to help anyone get a visa. We always told people about the yearly drawing for a visa and a green card. Although the American Government published the address and the free method anyone could use to apply for the drawing, there were also local organizations that, for a fee, would submit the application. The Archbishop already knew about that and was taking his chances. He was a pleasant conversationalist, obviously learned, and he didn't try to ply us with religious doctrine — something I had feared.

Among the other guests was a family we had met before, Mrs. Anil's physician brother and his family. His English was limited but good. His wife seemed too shy to talk with us. We were glad to see their daughter again; she was about ten years old and wore horn-rimmed glasses. We were told she was "very clever" which in this country meant that she was "very intelligent for a girl." The eight-year-old little boy was plump and had the largest brown eyes I had ever seen. Mr. Petro introduced him as "my assistant," which caused the boy to wiggle with pleasure.

Soon one of the Gregorian daughters appeared in her swimming suit and stepped into the small swimming pool. I guessed it was the only private pool in Aleppo. It was a very hot day, and she suggested we all take off our shoes and immerse our feet in the cold water. We were glad for the relief, and so was the Archbishop, who sat down with us on the edge of the pool and dabbled his ecclesiastical toes.

The new flats we had seen, and the buildings at the university had high ceilings, a way of mitigating the heat. But none had air conditioning. Later we would see families in the cool of the night, after a blistering desert day, spreading their picnic on the median of the Ring Road around Aleppo. People told us that many of the picnickers lived in big apartment houses in interior flats that had no outside windows. They must have been desperate for cool air, to picnic in such a dangerous place.

Suddenly the lights flickered out. Mr. Petro started a slow count and at the number five, we heard a generator kick in. It was extraordinarily unusual for a family home to have a generator, but Mr. Petro, was the "Generator King," and he liked having one for his own home.

Mrs. Anil and the girls brought platters of chicken, steaks, and lamb chops, and Mr. Petro supervised the grill. Though we had often seen women on their balconies hunched over small barbeque grills, we never saw a man grilling except at the Gregorians. I had become very fond of the thin Syrian lamb chops and was glad that Mr. Petro grilled his delicious ones quickly. He pointed out that "barbeque" was an Arabic word that had been tossed into the great grab bag of the English language.

Mrs. Anil had made a huge salad, a typical irresistible mix of greens with big, juicy tomatoes and small, sweet cucumbers with a dressing of olive oil and sweet vinegar. For dessert we had peaches and grapes pulled off the garden's vines.

The afternoon with gracious hosts, good company, delightful young people, beautiful small children, and an interesting man of the cloth could not have been more delightful. How kind of the Gregorians to make us part of their warm family, so much more comfortable than Ab's family! On this magic occasion, we felt truly welcome in this strange land.

The General

Amir and Miriam introduced us to the Gregorians. Miriam's father was a general in the Syrian army. One Sunday, Mr. Petro and Mrs. Anil drove us to the General's summer house in the mountains near Tartus.

On that bright and sunny Sunday, we headed east across relatively flat agricultural land before entering Syria's low, heavily forested mountains. As we wound around one mountain, we caught glimpses of the Mediterranean. When we pulled up in front of a pleasant house in a clearing, Miriam's three sisters and their mother flew out to greet us.

The hawk-nosed General appeared while the Gregorians were introducing us to everyone. Sighting Mel, the General grabbed him and planted kisses on both cheeks, Arab fashion, dumbfounding Mel, the Midwestern, straight father of four, a Methodist and a lawyer. I could see his

embarrassment gathering. Mr. Petro said something in Arabic, and the General backed away and offered his hand to shake. Then the covey of women rescued us and took us inside, where we were introduced to the old grandmother, who tried her few words of English with us. She wore a scarf, tied bandana style over her hair, the only woman in the family who wore a scarf.

I had brought along a Polaroid Instant camera that produced a photo print on the spot. It was a big success. But what the sisters really wanted from me was to know all about Miriam's apartment, especially the furniture. I hadn't observed it that closely, except it was all new and obviously nice. However, they wanted to know more, so I told them about the various pieces, as much as I could remember. I didn't know that in Syrian society, the husband is supposed to furnish the house for the bride. They took advantage of a disinterested source to check up on Amir.

Soon we were ushered onto the enormous patio that looked out over their orchard. There we were introduced to many of the extended family, about thirty in all. We were seated at a very long table set with innumerable little dishes: celery, fresh tomatoes, hummus, flat bread, various pickled vegetables, tabbouleh, plates of peppers, both hot and sweet. Mel, of course, was delighted, and so was I. I found to my surprise that I had forgotten about those enticing *mezze*, Middle-eastern appetizers. Soon main courses began to come: a mountain of rice with spare ribs atop it, a platter of red fish pulled from the Mediterranean that morning, a dish of spaghetti with meat balls, and then the hostess appeared and turned back the white shroud covering the carcass of a roasted lamb hanging from a hook at the far end of the patio. She began carving huge pieces for everyone. They had roasted a lamb in our honor! Were we the returned prodigals?

After a while I looked up from the feast and noticed an elderly man with a rifle skulking through the orchard. This worried me, but since there was so much I didn't know, I didn't alarm anyone; I couldn't discern whether he was friend or foe. I looked around more carefully and saw that one of the young men serving at the table had a hand gun in his waistband. Later I was to find out any man who was anybody in Syria had two bodyguards. The body guards became not only the important man's protection, but his servants as well. A really important man would have a velvet curtain in the back window of his car.

After that wonderful meal the sisters took me up to the flat roof and showed me where they and their mother sat to prepare peppers to dry for the winter. There were many peppers laying in the sun. The sisters asked if we would like to walk through the adjacent village. After that huge meal, exercise was welcome. As we strolled among the small houses, the girls pointed out the homes of their many cousins. It seemed as if everyone in the village was a relative. As the sun sank in the west, we heard the sound of bells and saw a farmer bringing his sheep to their barn, which was a cave in a small hillside. Farmers everywhere in the world would be doing the same evening chores, caring for their animals, just as my father had back home in Iowa.

When we returned to the house, Miriam's mother took us to a balcony that overlooked the ancient castle guarding the easiest access into Syria from the sea. There had been fortifications there from the time of the Crusaders. Within sight were the ruins of one of those Crusader Castles.

On the balcony, Miriam's mother was preparing a delicacy for us. She placed bits of the liver from the lamb we had recently eaten on a little grill. Mel and I were fond of liver, but we had never eaten it in tasty bite-sized pieces cooked over a grill. After the liver, she brought out a big watermelon. Spitting seeds over the edge of the balcony, we talked about education in our countries and watched the peaceful dusk enfold us all.

The Admiral

Through Amir and Miriam and the Gregorians we met a retired admiral in the Syrian navy. Latakia and Tartus, 20 miles further south, were the only ports Syria had been able to keep when Great Britain and France divided up the Middle East after World War I. Syria retained only a small stretch of coastline and no deep harbor for modern ships. We were surprised that Syria had a navy, with so little coast to defend.

Mrs. Hala, Amir's mother, had a spacious flat overlooking the beach in Latakia. He told us his mother was an enthusiastic Syrian partisan. One day, Mel and I found ourselves admiring the view of the Mediterranean from her large windows. We had been invited to meet the Admiral. I soon saw that she was going to be treat us to another generous Syrian meal. Her maid had already laid the table with large china plates, each one featuring an image of a different species of fish. I recognized the antique Limoges pattern.

Mrs. Hala's other guest was her brother, Admiral Hamid al-Koury. He noticed our smiles at the mention of the Syrian Navy. He smiled, too. "Our navy is small, but adequate. We have a number of patrol boats for the coast line," he explained. "We bought them from the French. And we have two submarines, two frigates, several minesweepers, and thirty missal boats. Not a large navy, but enough."

We maintained a diplomatic silence. Mahmoud had told us that the Syrian Navy's

submarines weren't operational, and that the French had unloaded their obsolete vessels on the Syrian Navy. The Admiral was an old man, probably retired long ago, and perhaps he didn't know.

"We have always been sailors in this part of the world," Mrs. Hala said. "We're the descendants of the Phoenicians, who sailed to North Africa and founded Carthage and sailed West and populated Sicily."

"And developed the first alphabet," the Admiral added.

"The Admiral worked with Jacques Cousteau," Mrs. Hala said with pride.

"That was an experience," he said. "Jacques was always tinkering with something. You know he invented the Aqua-Lung, and he kept improving it. We used his open-circuit SCUBA."

"Did you work on the *Calypso*?" I asked.

"Yes," the Admiral nodded enthusiastically. "I was there when we found the *La Thérèse* in shallow water off the coast of Crete." *La Thérèse* was a French gunship that sank near Crete in 1669.

"Did you bring her up?" Mel asked.

"She was too rotted, and she was large — a ship-of-the-line — had big brass guns. Too heavy and we didn't have the equipment. The hull was broken open, and there were a lot of bottles. We brought some up and also a rusted anchor."

"Tell them about the lost city off the coast of Lesbos," his sister suggested.

"The city walls were buckled from the earthquake that submerged it, but from the broken pillars, we could identify the old Roman *Cardo Maximus.* We found the building where the Roman Army kept their flags, the theatre where the plays of Aristophanes and Sophocles were held in the afternoons. It was like opening a book to the past." The Admiral sighed.

"Do you think that was the real Atlantis?" I asked.

"There are other submerged cities, or what may be the ruins of cities," the Admiral said carefully. "I think we're still at the very beginning of underwater archaeology."

"Do you miss your days of exploring?" Mel asked.

"Of course! I miss the excitement of new discoveries. We never knew what we might be able to bring up." He looked out at the waves coming in steady and rhythmic below us. "But more than that," the Admiral said "there was always that sliver of danger when you go down, the little thrill, coming up, when you know you've beaten whatever misstep had been waiting for you. You can become addicted to danger."

"If you were still diving, where would you choose to go?" Mel asked.

I hoped Mel would not get interested in diving. It was far too dangerous, I thought. He was a fine athlete, but in my estimate, he took enough chances when he was sailing his little boat on Spirit Lake in rough weather.

"The bottom of the Mediterranean is littered with valuable wrecks. The Israelis recently found an ancient ship off their coast."

"But where would you go if you had your choice?"

"The coast of Cyprus might be the best place. Our initial look there was promising."

"The past," I said, "the past is all around us here in this part of the world."

"The past, the past, yes. But Jacques was interested in the future, the future of the sea," the Admiral said, gesturing toward the blue waves below. He turned toward his sister and asked "Please bring the picture of my daughter."

Soon the Admiral gazed lovingly at a photo of a very pretty college girl, then held it out for us. "Maybe she'll be an oceanographer," he said.

"She belongs to the Jacques Cousteau Society," Mrs. Hala said proudly.

"The future is in taking care of the environment," the Admiral said. "The sea can't become an enormous dumping ground. Some of us kept the French from sinking their nuclear waste between Nice and Corsica. The French people were with us. Women and children stood in front of the train carrying the poisonous waste. They stopped the train."

"We have to take care of the sea, to honor the memory of our great ancestors," Mrs. Hala said.

"And for the future of our children and grandchildren," the Admiral added.

I saw the old Phoenician sea-farers' energy was not dormant. They lived on, in the thirst for adventure, in care for the past, and now in the environmental work for the future. The blue waves of the Old Middle Sea rolled in, a pearl of white foam on each lip, just as they had done for centuries. For millennia, people like us, or unlike us, watched and wondered. Some had been brave enough to put their boats on it. Some had been brave or foolish enough to build their cities on its sandy shores. Some of them had stood, like us, watching its rhythm, its predictability, its calms and its storms. They had come and gone, just as we would, no more important than grains of sand on the beach, except for a few like Jacques Cousteau, who were shining stars.

Adventures with the Gregorians

The Gregorians kindly included us in many of their family activities, introducing us to their friends and relatives, and taking it upon themselves to show us the sites of Syria.

One of our early expeditions was to the famous Crusader castle, the Krak des Chevaliers. We traveled with several of the Gregorians in two Mercedes cars: Mr. Petro, Mrs. Anil and Mel and I in one, Petro's brother, Serge and wife, Amana, in another. Serge, like Mrs. Anil was genial and spoke quite a bit of English, but Mrs. Amana spoke not at all, though she understood some English. Their plans included staying at a hotel owned by an Orthodox priest in a Christian area where they could buy pork from a Christian farmer and have it cooked for all of us at the hotel. Islam, like traditional Judaism, forbids eating pork; it was not available in Aleppo's grocery stores, except in one so-called "super-market." Only twice, during the two years we lived there, had this store imported canned hams. Pork would be a treat.

Krak des Chevaliers was considered the finest example in the world of a medieval castle, a massive structure in the Jebel/Lebanon mountains. The site commands the gap through these mountains from the sea to the Homs plain, making it the easiest access point for any invader hoping to conquer Syria. It remains formidable today, perched on the high, steep cliff, the smooth marble of its slippery, slanted glacis, the menacing arrow slits, the dark squares of machicolations in the towers where soldiers could hurl projectiles or throw down vats of boiling oil. In its time, it must have seemed impenetrable by any enemy, but it changed hands often. In 1031 the Emir of the city of Homs saw its strategic importance and imported a band of fierce Kurds from Persia to defend the first fortress built there. The first Crusaders took possession in 1099, that army was on the way to Jerusalem, and so passed on. The Emir of Homs reoccupied the site until it was retaken by the Count of Tripoli, who leased it out. It didn't generate enough revenue, so the Count transferred it to the Knights Hospitaller. Naturally protected by its geographical situation on a high mountain promontory, its outer ring is protected by a ditch and a series of rounded towers.

Inside was a fortress within the fortress. Another high wall with six towers and its own slippery glacis surrounded a kitchen, with great jars for storage of grains and the other supplies to feed a garrison of 2,000 men when the fort was at its strongest. Some of the grain pots were so enormous that I could believe the story in *A Thousand and One Night*s where Ali Baba hides in one. Some were big enough to hide at least two men. The cooking was done over giant fireplaces. There were also a great hall, warehouses, a lower court, an upper court, and a chapel. One of the towers, called the King's Daughter's Tower, has a small bedroom fit for royalty.

Frescoes have been uncovered on some of the walls, painted during the Crusaders' time there. I looked for the coat of arms of Richard the Lionheart that had been pointed out to me on my previous trip with the Malone group. The story then was that Richard had been held prisoner here, but Richard was held prisoner in far-away France. Had I really seen the coat of arms of the Lionheart? Maybe not, although Richard did lead an unsuccessful crusade to free Jerusalem from Saladin, and he must have come this way.

We had a noon meal in the great hall where, long ago crusaders had dined, perhaps with great formal dinners. Our meal was more modest. A local man had set up a rotisserie for twenty chickens. After lunch, as we were driving through the nearby village on our descent, chickens flopping out of our way, Mr. Petro observed, "It seems that we didn't eat them all."

We stopped at the farm of a Christian they knew well, bought his pork, and proceeded to the hotel owned by another friend, the Orthodox priest. When we arrived, we were shown to rooms, modern and pleasant, with beautiful views of the rolling countryside. But in the meantime, Mr. Petro discovered his friend, the priest, was gone for the week! Still anticipating our pork chop dinner, Mr. Petro took the meat to the cook in the kitchen. The cook was a Muslim, and he refused to prepare pork. The Assistant Manager remonstrated with him, pleading and even threatening him with loss of his job, but the cook was adamant; he could not endanger his immortal soul. Mr. Petro and Mr. Serge assured him and us that a Muslim could cook pork, but could not eat it. He would not be mollified. No pork in his kitchen.

Mel and I were unpacking our clothes and enjoying the sweet country air, the western style bathroom, and window view when Mr. Petro announced that we could not stay. "The priest will hear of this," he said. "That cook can kiss his job good-by!" We knew this was probably true, and we, too, believed the cook was being overly religious when it wasn't necessary. Surely his soul would not have been endangered by frying a few pork chops. But could we be sure of that? I had a good student who worried about taking a test during Ramadan, when she was obligated to fast all day — no food or drink, not even water. I assured her that her religion allowed her to skip a day of fasting by making it up later, but she said that she couldn't do it; she wouldn't feel right. We knew many people were very observant, probably more in this society than in Iowa. I was sometimes a little ashamed of myself for looking down on such devout believers, but surely some of the ultra-pious were more concerned with what others

thought about their religious observances than truly concerned about their souls.

We repacked and moved to another less luxurious hotel not far away. "This is fine," Mr. Petro announced. "These are good people." They were Christians, and the place was clean and neat, but very modest: no modern bathroom, but a curtainless shower that sprayed the whole room, as was the usual arrangement in modest Syrian homes. Outside the door were wooden clogs, the "bathroom shoes." Our room had a colorful inflatable kiddie pool beneath the shower to catch some of the water. At least there was no problem here with cooking the pork, and we had tasty pork chops for dinner.

In the morning Mel and I went for a walk in the countryside. I was surprised to be reminded of home when we saw a white church lifting its spire and cross in the hills. When we returned Mr. Serge was eating his breakfast. "We've just finished our walk," we explained.

"Yes, exercise, exercise, that's what we need. I had my walk early, too. Which way did you go?"

We pointed left.

"Too bad," he said, "I went right." His eyes twinkled. He knew we didn't believe him; this was part of the joke he and Mr. Petro had with Mr. Petro's two medical-intern daughters. The women had written lists, one with the foods their father and uncle must eat to stay heathy, the other with items they must avoid. Mr. Serge had assured us he was careful to eat the prescribed diet, but afterwards we watched him consume his usual dinner. We guessed that the daughters had recommended a regimen of exercises for them, and we believed the men were carefully avoiding it. We all laughed, but it was true that these middle-aged men were too portly.

Our first trip with the Gregorians was to Palmyra, which had been a significant trading destination during Roman times. The Romans built a magnificent *cardo maximus* lined with pillars and important shops and homes fronting it, as well as a theater and other public buildings. The roofs of almost all the buildings had deteriorated long ago, but many walls and imposing pillars were left. There were also several important temples to gods of the Middle East, including temples to Bel and the more elaborate one to Baalshamin (mentioned in the Bible), which had included special pens for the animals awaiting slaughter for sacrifice and wide channels to carry away the blood from the altar. This was the site of religious prostitution too.

There was an excellent road from Damascus across the desert to Palmyra. My first views of this Syrian desert taught me I didn't know anything about deserts. This one was dotted with what looked like scrubby weeds. These were forage for the sheep and goats the Bedouins still herded, following the rains across the countryside, just as they had been doing for centuries. The arbitrary borders imposed by the peace agreements after World War I did not take into consideration these historic herding routes. From time to time we would pass a Bedouin camp of large tents with black goat-hair tops, loosely woven to let air pass through in good weather, but which swelled and closed during an occasional rain. Later, when traveling in Jordan, we were able to inspect one of these tents, woven by the grandmother of young men we met at the Moon Valley Hotel.

On another later trip, Mr. Petro arranged for us to meet some Bedouins for a typical meal. We sat on the floor around several brass trays piled high with rice and topped with roasted sheep or lamb. The diners took a piece of flat bread, folded it and used it as a scoop, all eating from the common dishes. There were no spoons or forks. We discovered this easy style of eating was quite common in Syria. For example, when I attended the annual lunch for all the faculties of the Arabic, French and Literature professors at the university, the meal was served in this way with flat bread to dip from a common dish. At the first meal we were served at our landlord Ab's home, the family ate in this manner. When his wife noticed we were uncomfortable, she hastily produced plates and utensils for all of us. I was always uncomfortable eating with my hands. It's hard to adjust to such fundamentally different customs. I was more at home with the Gregorians, for whom knives and forks were customary.

Eating with the Bedouins, I was reminded of an account, probably apocryphal, of a Western traveler in the early days of modern Middle Eastern travel who was invited to have dinner with an important desert Sheik. At the beginning of the meal, the sheik gave the visitor the most delicious and important morsel. The Westerner found a sheep's eye looking up at him. Careful not to offend his important host, the Westerner gulped it down. Today the desert sheiks have become used to Westerners, so we did not have to deal with the sheep's eyes.

On the road to Palmyra, we expected to see camels around the Bedouin camps, but there were none. There were, however, big trucks fitted with large round tanks, much like the milk trucks we saw on Iowa roads. These, we learned, were British army water trucks left here after World War II. Some aspects of a more modern world had come even to the traditional Bedouins.

There were few vehicles along the way, but as we neared Palmyra, a large van passed us, bearing a sign for the Norwegian Embassy. It was the policy of the international embassies to show a country's sites to its diplomats, and we assumed this was one of those official visits.

All vehicles were required to stop at the usual sentry shack before entering the town. These sentry shacks are posted along all of Syria's highways. Mr. Petro didn't stop. He whizzed past, yelling out the window, "I've got the American Embassy with me," as our Mercedes and Serge's roared on through. Mel and I smiled. Our social status had been elevated! When we pulled into our hotel's parking lot, we saw the Norwegian van.

The hotel was built on and into an ancient structure, quite common in the Middle East. It was a great pleasure to live for a little while in a part of a place so old and historic. Although its original use was lost to time, I could imagine a fascinating history for it and its inhabitants. During Roman days what visiting generals or merchants with wares of silk from China, or beautiful slaves from Africa had visited?

Upon arriving, we were hot and dusty from our trek across the desert. Because Mrs. Anil thought the car's air conditioning healthy, we had driven with all the windows down, the desert wind whipping in. Sweaty and tired, I hurried into the shower and turned on the water full blast. I yelped and leaped out. Cold water!

When Mel brought in the luggage, he laughed sympathetically: "The desk clerk says the Norwegians have used all the hot water. We have to wait a little while for some more to heat." In my opinion this was not good diplomacy. This was no way to treat Mr. Petro's "American Embassy!"

The next morning, we began our exploration of the historic site. Mr. Gregorian knew the director of the museum, who gave us the VIP tour. Explaining the statues, he pointed out Odaenathus, who had been installed as ruler by the Romans. Like most of the statues, he had lost his head long ago. His body was draped in Roman robes, while many of the other statues wore decidedly Persian costumes. Near him was his second Queen, Zenobia. While away on patrol, he and his oldest son by the first wife, perished. Whether someone was paid to put them out of the way was open to conjecture. At any rate, Zenobia assumed power. She took command of the army and captured Anatolia. When she moved to take over Egypt next, the Romans lost patience. Aurelian was sent to subdue her and her army. When he had nearly surrounded her, she took a swift camel toward the East, but she wasn't quick enough. She was captured, and later Aurelian displayed her in Rome in golden chains. From the look of her profile on the gold coins in the Museum's collection, I think she would not have put up with the Norwegians using all the hot water. She is one of the few women in the Middle East who rose to power, and her legends abound, most of them untrue.

Palmyra had ancient burial places and tombs. Some of the very ancient sites still had racks where the wrapped bodies were left in towers to dry in the desert air. Others dated from the Christian era when the Middle East was almost exclusively Christian. The most famous tomb was the one of three brothers, featuring well-preserved frescoes on the walls. There was another interesting tomb we could not visit because a poisonous snake had decided to make it his home. Syria had several poisonous snakes, but I never saw one.

The hotel desk clerk mentioned the magnificent sunsets that could be seen from the nearby Arab castle on a high hill. I asked if the others would like to go there at sunset, but Mrs. Anil shivered, and they declined. Mrs. Anil tearfully told us that shortly after they were married, they had come out to Palmyra, and had gone to see the sunset there, and it was on that spot where her miscarriage began. She still was too sad to go there again.

Palmyra had grown up as a trading town, known for its dates and for imports from the Far East. In Arabic its name is *Tadmore* from "*tad*" which means dates. It was still an oasis, but the villagers lived apart from the ruins, behind a mud wall. The glory that had been Palmyra was gone, but its vestiges remained, and the government was doing all it could to preserve them.

Unfortunately, the terrorist forces of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) conquered much of the country in 2015. The fighters were bent on destroying everything that wasn't Muslim. This meant just about everything at Palmyra. They wrecked the temples dedicated to Bel and to Baal because of their ancient religious meanings, and, of course, they destroyed the Roman temples to their gods and their emperors. They beheaded the 80-year-old director of the museum because he refused to tell them where he had hidden some of the museum's most valuable exhibits. He may not have been Mr. Petro's friend, the kindly and knowledgeable man who was our guide, but whoever he was, the world lost a valuable hero who was trying to preserve knowledge and the heritage of us all.

From Palmyra we drove through Al-Quriyah, the city where one of my graduate students, Sylvia, had grown up. I was looking forward to seeing this town where her father, a Shia Muslim, and her mother, an Ismaili Muslim, lived and worked. Both were lawyers and had been active in civil rights cases in Syria. Sylvia had told me that her town did not have separate quarters for the different religious groups. Instead Christians, Muslims, Jews, and Zoroastrians lived side by side in peace. Her parents' activism probably explains why, after I left the university, the Department Chair told Sylvia the University of Aleppo could not

grant her a Master's degree, although she had done all the work for it.

Our next stop was the mud-brick town of Raqqa. Mr. Petro told us the story of its history. He said a Roman Garrison had been stationed there, and the Roman general discovered that two of his officers, Bacchus and Sarkus, were secretly Christians. Later I learned the second saint's Roman name was Sergius. The general commanded them to bow down to the emperor's statue, but they refused. They had to be punished. First, he paraded them through town in women's clothes; then he had them beaten so severely that Bacchus succumbed. Sergius-Sarkus then was forced to walk out into the desert wearing shoes of nails. In Mr. Petro's telling, roses bloomed from every bloody step he took. The dead Bacchus appeared to Sarkus in a dream and asked him to remain faithful and never give in. Petro took us to the place where Sergius-Sarkus was beheaded.

Saint Julia, a young woman who tried to help him, also was beheaded. Interested in a woman saint, I later tried to learn more about Julia. Probably she was the Orthodox Virgin Martyr Julia of Carthage, who had been a slave in Syria before she was crucified on the island of Corsica. What is true in these stories is that the Romans killed Christians and had many varieties of torture and execution for them.

Thanks in part to these stories, a new city grew up near Raqqa at the site of the martyrdoms. First called Sergiopolis, the city contained a basilica dedicated to Sergius and Julia. In its day, this was a significant trading center connecting Palmyra and the Euphrates with Aleppo and Antioch. It was abandoned in the 13th century, after invasions by Mongols and Turks. From the ruins we could tell it had been a substantial city with enormous, thick walls and many public buildings, all constructed from local quartz. Sparkling in the desert sun, the white walls of Sergiopolis became a bright beacon for the Christians who came to the saint's shrine. Mr. Petro said it had been an important pilgrimage site, and the local Arabs still venerated Sarkus and Bacchus.

Thanksgiving with the Gregorians

As the season for Thanksgiving approached during our first semester in Aleppo, I started to plan a festive meal for the Gregorians, who had been so good to us. Unable to find a turkey in our usual chicken store or any other meat store, I asked Mrs. Anil and Mr. Petro.

"It's called Indian here," he said, and he promised to take us to the market on Friday. There we found live turkeys gobbling in a most disconcerted manner, as if they suspected I was up to no good. They looked quite small to me, but I picked out the largest one, and the proprietor promptly wrung its neck. Then Mel and Mr. Petro helped me pull the feathers off. I would do the rest of it at home, saving the liver and heart to cook with the stuffing I was going to make with onions and French bread from the European bakery. Mrs. Anil, who was an excellent cook, warned me the turkey must be boiled before it was roasted. I thought boiling a turkey before it was roasted would ruin it. I thanked her and smiled to myself. I had years of experience. I knew how to roast a turkey. I was also planning to make a salad the day before, with vegetables in Jell-O.

The big day arrived, and I put the turkey in the oven early, a little uncertain about how long it needed to bake. As we sat down to the table, Mr. Petro poked the Jell-O salad beside his plate and told me, "Jell-O is only for desserts." I took all the salads back to the kitchen. The opening of my feast was not festive.

Then Mel began to carve the bird. The knife wasn't sharp enough. Mel looked at me beseechingly, then tried again to cut into the meat. This manly effort sent the turkey, platter and all, onto the floor. There was a collective gasp. Mel and I exchanged another look, and though he was sympathetic, there was a note of blame there, too. I retrieved the mess and rushed it into the kitchen.

I had been a little put out with him earlier in the day when he brought home a big rotisserie chicken. "Just in case," he had told me. Grateful to him now, I returned with Syria's delicious street food, still counting on the success of my stuffing. We had a good laugh (though mine was mostly forced), and we proceeded to have as American a Thanksgiving as possible, including traditional American stuffing. After the Gregorians left, I turned my look on Mel. "Honest to God," he said, "it really did slip."

First Christmas in Syria

Even before Thanksgiving I was anticipating Christmas decorations in our favorite restaurant, Wanness, which was owned by Christians. Conditioned by the commercialism of Christmas at home, I expected decorations appearing in the Christian quarter on 1 November, as they would in Cedar Rapids. But there were no street decorations for Christmas in Syria. Wanness put up only a few paper wreaths. I wanted to decorate our flat and have our customary Christmas, despite the disappointing lack of festive spirit around us. Arno told us of one Christian store that might have some decorations. Mel and I started our search.

"Yes, we have some Christmas decorations," the proprietor said, "but we never put them out until St. Barbara's Day." Our Methodist Protestant heritage had not included St. Barbara's Day, which we learned was 4 December. We planned to return later, but when we did, we were disappointed: the only decorations were printed paper. I bought two wreaths, one for the door and one to hang above the dining room table.

In Damascus, though, Christmas was a good holiday for everyone. We went there on Christmas Eve and found stores decorated with garlands, wreaths, and strings of lights, and we heard Christmas hymns broadcast from the stores along the street called Straight, where a large group of Christians lived and had their shops. We joined the happy crowds, walking along the street, hundreds of Christians and Muslims admiring the decorations and the festivities. Muslims too loved a good holiday, and they regarded Jesus as a prophet and venerated the Virgin Mary. The government had even made Christmas an official holiday.

One of the most interesting aspects of our stroll down this Christmas street was a visit to an Orthodox church. There a priest showed us a diorama of the cave-stable where Jesus was born, complete with a hillside for the shepherds. It had a miniature waterwheel over a tiny stream. Waterwheels had been used throughout the Middle East for irrigating the grain fields since their introduction by the Romans. I wished I could see it working, but the priest explained this diorama could not be lighted up and working until twelve midnight, Christmas morning. Because we were scheduled to meet our Damascus Fulbright girls the next morning for a trip to Jordan we couldn't stay up and attend the church service and watch the diorama come to life. I still regret not seeing that tiny waterwheel in action. Looking back on that Christmas Eve Day, I realize it wasn't the decorations or presents I missed the most in less festive Aleppo. Rather it was the atmosphere of festival, the Advent spirit of anticipation that comes with an American Christmas season.

Easter in Syria

Easter in Syria also was an entirely different experience for us. In Cedar Rapids, I usually attended the Ash Wednesday service in the Coe College Chapel, but we rarely attended Good Friday services at our church. Mel was generally more observant than I, but I began to feel somewhat differently while living in the Middle East. There, Christians were an uneasy minority, where Muslim governments varied in their attitudes toward Christians from benign tolerance to hostility. I began to feel that identifying with Christians world-wide was important. One young woman told me that on the International Day of Prayer, she was encouraged because, although she was a minority in Syria, she knew that fellow Christians from all over the world were praying with her. I was especially impressed with the Orthodox observance of Good Friday.

Mel and I had agreed to be Good Friday chaperones for a group of young women from the Armenian club in Aleppo. They told us it was the custom of the Christian young people to visit all the churches in town on Good Friday. We began at the Armenian Orthodox Church, which was the prototype for all of them. We entered a silent sanctuary. No music, no choir. Just silence. Worshippers sat silently in various places. They came and left wordlessly, heads bowed. Our girls chose one of the long pews. Soon a row of young Armenian men from the Young Peoples Club took the pew behind us. All of them seemed very serious. They bowed their heads and prayed silently. Of course, the women were very much aware of all the men behind them, and we knew full well why the men had chosen their pew.

After a while one of our women arose and walked to the front. There she took a cotton ball from the child who held a bowl of them and wiped the wounds of the wooden carving of Christ that lay in front of the altar. One by one the others did the same, and then the young men took their turns. Afterward, we all went on to the next church, to repeat this Orthodox ritual. All of this was very quiet and sad as all the young people mourned for the slain Jesus. To us, this represented the best sort of religious practice.

I wished I could have shown the young people from the Armenian Club the Christmas and Easter services at our home church, with the massed choirs, orchestra, and hymns on the magnificent organ. But I fear they would miss the quieter devotions of their own church.

Margo and Mat Armstrong

Main Persons

Margo Armstrong, a Canadian national, trained as a nurse, new to Syria.

Mat Armstrong, Margo's husband, who had become the new principal of the international school at ICARDA.

Al, an American who taught art at the international school.

Noor, Al's Syrian wife.

The school of the International Consortium for Agriculture in Dry Areas (ICARDA) provided education for the children of scientists from around the world who worked for the consortium.

ICARDA's scientists were collecting seeds of various grains that had been grown for centuries in the dry Middle East. By planting and harvesting them, ICARDA was developing a seed bank in Aleppo and sending some of the results of their research to the International Seed Bank in Norway (sometimes called the Doomsday Seed Bank). The scientists came from all over the world, and we became friends with several from India and a delightful family from France. There were also local scientists and local farm workers at ICARDA. This was a popular program. The organization gave some of the seeds they were growing to local farmers to try in their own fields.

The ICARDA school offered the subjects necessary to pass the English Baccalaureate, a certification of the equivalent to an American high school education. In addition to the scientists' children, the ICARDA school also served the children of its teachers and some local students, almost all sons whose fathers could afford the tuition.

Fulbright rules forbade the spouse of a recipient from working for pay in the country of the appointment, but he could volunteer. We had first visited the school with Ab Nassar, our landlord. His wife, Fatima, was a teacher there, and he had applied unsuccessfully to become principal. Mel thought this would be a good place to volunteer, and was pleased when the Nassars offered to take us there.

At the school, we met Mat, the new principal. A Canadian from Ontario, Mat Armstrong and his wife, Margo, had attended one of the recruitment fairs for international schools, and he had applied for a job as counselor at the ICARDA International School in Aleppo. Margo was a nurse who later worked several days a week at the school. They lived a few miles away from us in a spacious flat in the Medical District. Their house search had been easier than ours, because ICARDA had a local employee charged with helping new teachers find suitable flats from his approved list. The school also provided a car. How we wished the Fulbright Association offered this kind of service!

They had arrived a few weeks before we came, and although Mat was a school counselor, because he had a graduate degree, he was made the acting principal. The former principal, Barney Griffin, had been fired when the board discovered that although he called himself Dr. Griffin, he had fictionalized his resume, and had hung a fake Ph.D. diploma on the wall behind his desk. Ab Nassar had repeated gossip that Griffin had been fired because he converted to Islam. Though Griffin had been fired because of his false credentials, not because of religion, he was, indeed, planning to marry a young local woman from a wealthy family who would not accept him unless he converted. The school's faculty also heard the rumor that he had been married twice before when he was teaching in an international school in Germany. There was speculation about whether he had obtained a German divorce.

When they met at ICARDA, Mel and Mat immediately liked each other, and in short order Mel was a volunteer: the substitute history teacher, tennis coach, and coach of the international quiz team.

Finding Margo and Mat was like finding another American couple on a desert island, and we soon became close friends. They shared our Midwestern American accent, and they were much like our Iowa neighbors. Like us, they struggled with the questions and confusions of first-timers in the Middle East. Mat was short, perpetually cheerful and full of positive axioms. Margo smiled gently at his old bromides. In her nursing career she had dealt with numerous problems, and Mel and I speculated that perhaps she was the more practical person in that pair. It turned out Margo was an excellent driver, and she enjoyed taking us on trips. We called her the Intrepid Margo. We had wonderful adventures together.

One day we started out to explore some Roman ruins north of Aleppo, Margo driving. There had been rain the night before, so the road into the Roman Garrison was dotted with puddles. We came to an enormous one, and Margo stopped before it. A farmer working nearby came and inspected the puddle, found a stick and probed it. The stick didn't go down very far, so Margo drove on fearlessly. As the water splashed away from the wheels, I saw we had driven over the lintel of a Roman house. No matter the terrain or the condition of the road, Margo got us to our destination. We were delighted later in the day to cross a Roman-made bridge of two arches that our guide books said was wide enough for two chariots to pass at the same time.

Not so a good driver, Mat was content to let Margo handle the car. However, he was a champion bargainer. We had discovered bargaining was both an art and a practical necessity. The Syrians and the Turks expected their customers to bargain, and this was part of the social fabric of buying and selling, as well as part of the fun.

One of our trips to Turkey, during a winter break, was to Hurran and Urfa, now called Sanliurfa. The Turkish government claimed Hurran was the birthplace of the biblical prophet, Abraham, revered by Christians, Jews and Muslims. Muslim scholars had determined that Abraham was born in one of the group of caves at Sanliurfa.

Following our maps, we pulled into the town with a line of hotels on its main street. We drove down to the end of the street, stopping at a hotel across from the designated cave. We all went in to see if this was affordable for us. Mat expressed surprise and dismay at the price the proprietor quoted. In Turkish none of us understood, the proprietor gestured across the street at the cave's mouth. Clearly, he was telling us what a good location this hotel had. Mat was not impressed. He shook his head and answered, "La, la, la" in Arabic which the proprietor refused to understand, although, the shaken head was a gesture almost universally understood. Many more words were exchanged, Turkish, from the proprietor still talking, and English and a few words of Arabic from Mat. "Back to the car," said Mat, and we all turned and left. Margo and I were seated, and the men were about to get in, when the proprietor came running out, waving his arms to stop us. "Now we will get a fair price," Mat said, and sure enough, the proprietor's price had come down. So we went back in and were shown to comfortable rooms. That evening in the dining room, we discovered there was only one other couple staying at the hotel. Winter was Sanliurfa's off season.

The cave was just a cave to us, but the Muslims there were very impressed. Westerners are inclined to scoff at the stories about ancient sites that cannot be corroborated with documentary evidence. I take a somewhat different view, having heard of sites in the desert at Wadi Rum that are now being re-discovered because someone in the desert community remembers a story about an ancient place and shows the place to an archeologist. Many ancient people, because they had no written language, transmitted their stories, word for word to the next generation, to be passed on with precision for generations. Surely the sites of holy places often were remembered accurately.

The other major site in Sanliurfa was the madrassa (school), where, we were told, the devil threw down Abraham because he believed in one God, but Abraham was not injured because he landed in a lovely pool that appeared just in time to break his fall. This legend seems more doubtful than the story of Abraham's birth in Sanliurfa. There are other versions of the legend of Balıklıgöl or the Pool of Abraham.

Merchants always frequented these tourist sites, and one approached Mat and Mel to sell leather jackets. Mel wasn't interested, but Mat tried on one that fit him perfectly. He and the merchant bargained as we went about the site. Margo became so tired of this that she slipped away. Despite the extended discussion, Mat and the merchant did not come to any agreement, so finally the merchant went off. Mat called after him, "If you come down to my price, bring the jacket to the hotel tonight." I thought this was futile — probably the man didn't understand enough English, or Mat was offering a price so low the merchant couldn't afford to take it. To my surprise in the evening, the merchant did show up at our hotel, and Mat bought a nice leather jacket.

Mat and Margo often went out to eat with us. In Aleppo we frequented the Coffee Cup that offered a very Western menu and the Wanness café that served the best traditional local dishes — their lentil soup was to die for. The government forbade fast food franchises in Aleppo, but this did not matter because the local fast food was wonderful — the rotisserie chicken we bought regularly, and gyros with real, creamy yogurt, or falafel, cooked on the street, hot, wonderful nuggets. However, there was one street food that disappointed us. In June we began to see large steaming pots of corn on the street. We immediately tried some. It was hard, and not sweet! This was *not* Iowa sweetcorn! Ah well, we could get tasty chicken, gyros, and falafel. Aleppo street food was fine, and we did not need anything else, not even MacDonald's.

Finding Carpets

Margo shared my enthusiasm for the hand-woven rugs of the region. I was eager to learn more about these carpets, the materials and the weavers. Most are works of art, as valuable for their beauty as for their utility, and their makers were mainly woman. Once, visiting a carpet-weaving village, I saw skeins of wool, hung out to dry after dyeing. Because they were dyed in skeins, I saw that the colors varied somewhat, depending on the loops in the skein. I was lucky one day, traveling out in the country, to watch a woman washing her freshly spun skeins of yarn in a slow moving river.

Margo had borrowed a book on important Turkish carpets from one of the teachers at ICARDA. From it, we learned that all over the

Middle East, villages had their own patterns, and often the pattern was named from its village. With modern communications, this was changing, so today villagers borrowed patterns and sometimes adapted them, blending them with their traditional patterns.

Margo and I made several rug-buying trips together. One Syrian holiday weekend, Margo drove the four of us over the border to a beach resort on the southern shore of Turkey. She was looking for Persian rugs for their flat. She admired the Noom design of blue and brown on white and cream, and she had found two of them previously. I was looking for a rare type, a flat weave geometric pattern of six-sided shapes in shades of yellow, gold, orange, coral-orange, gray, white and black.

We left Mat and Mel on the beach — Mat drinking a beer and Mel an Orangina — while we drove north up the mountain to the village shown in Margo's book with the picture of a carpet of the kind I was anxious to find. In the village, we stopped at what seemed to be the only store and gas station. They had several small carpets for sale, but not the pattern I was looking for. Our Turkish was limited to "please" and "thank you," so although we showed the men in the store the picture, they were unable to help us. Driving on through the village, we noticed -- thrown over a vacant roadside stand -- the pattern I wanted. No one was nearby, but Margo stopped, and I got out to inspect it. Alas, it was full of holes and very old. A little further on, we stopped at a large house to ask for help. We knocked on the door and showed the woman inside the picture of the carpet. Excited, she called in a man who called a friend and a boy who was learning English. The boy, who looked as if he might be in the eighth grade, became our interpreter.

On a terrace we waited for the men to drag carpets out from the house. While waiting, I noticed at one end of the terrace was a brick construction that held the kitchen stove. To keep the heat out of the house when cooking, this arrangement was found almost everywhere in this part of Turkey. Among the carpets that began to appear, I saw one of the design I coveted. We examined it carefully and, unfortunately, found a big hole in one corner. The boy explained we could have it rewoven, the hole was nothing, they all said. "Only $1000" the boy translated the price. Though everyone was kind and friendly, based on my experience purchasing from my Aleppo merchant, I knew this was far away a fair price, and I didn't want to have to find someone to reweave it (could they get the right colors of yarn?). We thanked them graciously and set out again.

The village streets, not in a grid, but twisted around from house to house. At the edge of the village, we saw a young woman emerge from an overgrown gorge, carrying a pail of grapes. She spoke some English. She said she and her brother had been picking wild grapes, and when we showed her the picture of the carpet, she exclaimed, "My mother made one of these." Her brother emerged with another pail of grapes, and they climbed into the car and showed us to their house. Their elderly mother emerged and greeted us, nodding her head when she saw the pattern I was looking for. The brother brought out the carpet and spread it out for us. No holes. It was perfect. So we bargained. They didn't ask $1,000. They started at $600. The brother and sister translated for us. The mother told us she was a widow. She had woven the carpet, and the brother had picked it up from the floor where it was in use. The mother was obviously proud of her skill. Perhaps she had dyed the yarn, the gold, the pinkish red and muted orange that were set off by the black and gray goat hair. What a find! As we bargained, I remembered that the English language newspaper from Lebanon had told us prices of heating oil in Turkey had gone up more than 15%. It was nearing the end of the summer, and here in the mountains, it would soon be cold. I could afford to pay a little more than half. So I gave them $400 for my find. The brother and sister shook the dust out of the carpet, folded it neatly and put it in the back of Margo's station wagon.

As we prepared to leave, the sun was sinking low in the West, and the old mother began to worry about two women out alone on the road as the day darkened. She insisted, and her children insisted, too, that we stay and spend the night with them. Clearly they really meant it, and we were touched.

Leaving the village, we passed a house with a heavily embroidered sack beside the door. Margo laughed and asked if I wanted to stop and bargain for it, but the shadows were lengthening, so I said no. Soon the intrepid Margo was winding down the mountain, dodging the occasional enormous truck loaded with huge tree trunks bound for a sawmill, and navigating each turn with expertise.

We had met some charming and kindly people, who worried about two women driving the mountain roads in the dark. I had found a wonderful, rare carpet from an artist-weaver. She and her children had enough money to heat their house for the winter. We'd had a good day, even better than beer and Orangina on the beach.

In Turkey we had met entrepreneurs, carpet sellers, and hotel staff, mostly friendly and all interested in dealing with us. One day we unexpectedly met some hospitable soldiers at their check point near a customs gate at Bab Halawa.

We were returning from travel in Turkey when the Armstrong's station wagon huffed and puffed

and, like a balky horse. It stopped just beyond the customs shack and refused to move further. Mat and Mel got out, opened the hood and peered inside. Margo and I knew that both men were mechanically inept, but that examining the motor and all the mysterious wires and hoses underneath the hood was part of every man's duty, even if it was ineffectual. We women knew to be patient.

Mat opined that the car was overheated in the hot sun. He and Mel decided to walk back to the check point and see if they could phone for help. They returned rapidly and said that the young soldiers at the check point had invited all of us to come and sit on the grass outside their gate. We no sooner arrived, than the commander appeared and insisted that they must bring us inside. He ordered chairs for us and glasses of cold water. We regretted that our only Turkish was "yes, no, please, and thank you." Though the soldiers had no English, we found means to converse. We spread out our maps of Turkey, and by sign language, asked the young soldiers to point out their home towns. Most came from far-flung villages. Soon we were engaged in active conversation, understanding each other by pointing, smiling, and laughing. To me many of the eager and friendly faces around us seemed to be very young, perhaps only sixteen. Their enthusiasm was that of teenagers. When Mat and Mel decided that we should walk back to the car, hoping it might have cooled down, one of the soldiers was assigned to go with us. Luckily the car started, confirming master-mechanic Mat's diagnosis. And soon we were on our way back to Aleppo, having seen young people very much like our own children had been a few years before.

The young everywhere have enthusiasm and hopes. Why isn't the world helping all of them to achieve their goals? Turkey and Syria shared a long border that had not always been peaceful. Even in 1996-1998 there was animosity simmering between the two governments. Workers at Turkey's holy sites seemed to care nothing of this, nor did the businessmen who plied their wares there. The baby-faced young soldiers and their hospitable commander at the border were excellent ambassadors for their government. If only the diplomats in the Middle East were as accommodating as these charming, friendly people.

Mountain Jinns

Among the faculty of the ICARDA International School that we came to know was were Al, an American who taught art, and his Syrian wife, Noor. When Al discovered our interest in ancient sites, he invited us along to the deserted Roman city of Apamea, where he was going to shoot photographs he hoped to sell to a travel magazine. We packed a picnic and made a day of it.

Apamea was once as important as Antioch and Palmyra. From this city in the 2nd century Marc Antony launched his campaign to conquer Armenia. Cleopatra accompanied him as far as the Euphrates before returning to Egypt.

"Two hundred thousand people lived here," Noor said. "Dead a long time…. Ghosts and jinns." She shrugged apprehensively.

After passing the guard at the gate and driving in, Al reassured her, "Just old fairy tales."

"Jinns," she murmured, fingering her worry beads.

The many pillars of the Roman *cardo* m*aximus* (main street) were still mostly intact, as were the sets of stone steps that had led into the doors, long gone, of the little shops between them. We arrived a few minutes after noon, and set out our picnic of sandwiches and apples on a broken stone. Soon we were visited by a teenager from a neighboring picnic group, who spoke good high-school English. He wanted us to come and meet his family.

They too had spread their picnic on a fallen stone and surrounded it with the plastic chairs from their small pickup parked nearby. They were an extended family, and many children were playing hide and seek among the pillars. Women were bringing out more food, and several men sat with two old people who were resting in the chairs. They had also brought a canister of *mazoot* with a cooking ring on top. The mother stripped the leaves off some stems she had harvested between nearby stones, and dumped them in the boiling pot on her picnic stove.

In Syria, where there had been no spraying of herbicides, wild plants still flourished, and Syrians continued to eat those which had been in their diet for centuries. In the spring we had often seen old women with knives and scissors harvesting mint and other herbs on the university's grounds, and from far away we had observed them harvesting even on the steep glacis of the Citadel.

The teenager's mother offered some of the cooked vegetable to us. Noor assured us it was good. We decided it tasted something like asparagus. The mother spread out two cold rotisserie chickens, flatbread, yogurt, a container of lentils, a plate of freshly picked mint, a bowl of dried dates, and some small cookies. We Americans went back to our sandwiches and apples, realizing how paltry was our picnic. Noor observed with a little pride that Syrians knew how to have picnics.

Al set up his camera so it could catch the white marble of the pillars as well as their dark shadows on the old road. While we inspected the ruins, the sun inched its path down the West.

Finally, when Al didn't have enough light to get more good shots, we started the drive back to Aleppo.

Mel and I sat in the back seat of Al's Ford. We were crossing the Anti-Lebanon Mountains. To placate the anxious Noor, Al signaled with his horn at every turn, every crossroad, every curve and hill, just the way they teach driving in Aleppo. The slopes were covered with thick pines. In this dark forest there are no villages, and not once did I see a house or a plume of smoke denoting a chimney.

"There are many magic stories from these mountains," Al said.

"Jinns," Noor shuddered.

"Nonsense. Syrian literature is full of fairy tales featuring jinns, but nobody believes those stories anymore."

Noor coughed.

"Well, maybe a few old people in the villages still believe in them."

Noor tightened her lips in silent disagreement.

We passed an old woman who whacked her donkey with a stick now and then to keep him moving. She wore a long red and green skirt and blouse. Rural Muslim women always wear scarves, but she had no head covering.

"A witch," Noor said.

Here and there a sheep herder trailed his flock along the highway, in his traditional *galabeya,* the long cloak, and *keffiyeh,* the black and white head scarf. At a crossroads where a little dirt lane intersected the highway, a clutch of young men waited for the mini-van which served as a bus. They were dressed in western clothes, smoking cigarettes, laughing with each other.

"*Those* people are real," Al told her.

"They're probably the jinns of the mountain."

As we descended, we noticed a motorcycle following us. By this time we had left a good graveled road for a temporary lane through an extended construction area. Al said that the government was building an irrigation project. We felt like Lilliputians in our small Ford on the road that seemed to wind randomly among massive concrete culverts strewn all around and the bulldozers still at work so late in the day. Huge Caterpillar tractors shod with the wide, heavy treads of tanks plowed up and down the hills. Al proceeded bravely among giant trucks, loaded with tons of debris, roaring far too close to us. He confidently negotiated the slippery red clay, the sucking sand and loose gravel of the make-shift road.

Despite the dust and noise, the motorcycle came up on us.

"He wants to sell us something."

"Mountain jinn," Noor replied. She did not want to be here.

Al slowed a little.

"Don't let him near! He's a jinn!"

But soon the motorcycle came even with us on the narrow road. The young rider seemed impervious to the rough road and the dust.

"Antiques," he called in Arabic.

Unable to hear him, Al lowered his window, but without slowing the car. The young man reached into a black plastic bag on his handlebars, pulled out several clay figures and handed them through the window. He offered the first to Noor, but she refused to touch it. Al handed them back. "Not good reproductions," he shouted. "You should get a better artist."

One of my friends, a California artist, makes pre-Columbian figures that are so good they now appear in a number of major museums as the real thing. So, I know enough to mistrust clay figures. But these *could* be authentic. The vitrified clay tablets found at Ebla not far from here are four thousand years old.

"Were those real?" I asked.

"Fake," he replied. "For tourists."

Noor countered. "They sell some real ones sometimes. But, if you buy these, they will melt tomorrow."

"Oh, come into the modern world," Al pleaded kindly.

He knew a lot about ancient art. He had a degree in art history and studied in Paris. He was in his element in the Middle East.

"Where would they get real ones?"

"They're kids, they rob graves," Al explained. "They look for the old Phoenician graves. They dig to get these things."

"Isn't that illegal?"

"The government takes all the old things when they find them, but those kids need a little money."

Motorcyclist jounced with us as we careened along the makeshift track. He dug deeper into his bag and brought out a small gold ring and a seal, maybe ivory, maybe bone. Again they passed through the window. Al sniffed at them, and handed them around.

"Good!" Motorcyclist shouted, sounding wounded by Al's disdain for his merchandise. Then, from inside his shirt front he fished a small glass vase. Despite the spray of gravel as Al accelerated, the rider passed the vase through the window. After a glance, Al said it was authentic. But in Arabic he told the rolling dealer that it wasn't very good. He remonstrated vociferously, taking both hands from the handlebars and waving protest. We all bounced through ruts, the motorcycle sometimes seeming to leave the ground altogether.

Al handed the vase to me. I was almost afraid to hold something so archaic and fragile. I had seen ancient glass at the Field Museum in Chicago, but I'd given it little attention, and I would

never have anticipated holding any in my hands. This piece was about four or five inches high with a bulbous bottom and a slim, fluted neck. The glass was two colors — the base color seemed gray, but perhaps it had been clear at one time. Swirled through the gray was a muted, mustard yellow. Bump! Jolt. I grasped it tightly.

Once, a Belgian diplomat in Bruges had shown us with pride an ancient Egyptian falcon he had smuggled home in the diplomatic bag. Ever since, I have been bitter against those who would rob a developing country of its heritage. But turning this little vase in my hands, I understood the temptation. Resisting my greedy thoughts, I gave it back to Al who returned it to Motorcycle.

Noor clutched the dashboard.

"How much?" Al asked Motorcycle.

"Come to my house," Motorcycle shouted. "I have much more."

"His house is underground. You never come back," Noor warned.

Al repeated, "How much?"

"Fifty thousand lira!"

Al laughed and sped up. But Motorcycle persisted, pulling alongside again. Suddenly, a monstrous debris-laden truck confronted us on the narrow road. I closed my eyes, expecting to be smashed in the next second beneath the great wheels, never to see the young rider again in this life. Al veered to the right. The behemoth roared past, almost harvesting our mirror. I realized I had been holding my breath. Despite the noise, I could hear Noor, her face, white and tense, rattling her worry beads.

To my surprise and relief, when I opened my eyes and breathed again, there was a vague, ghostly outline in the dust cloud beside us.

"Forty thousand for you!" came a voice from the whirlwind. "You my friend."

"Only a jinn could have survived!" Noor now had her proof.

Ignoring her, Al casually countered, "Ten thousand." I could tell he wasn't really interested, and that gave him the upper hand.

"I have much more at my house," Motorcycle repeated. "Only thirty thousand."

Seeing his chance Al made a final offer, "Twenty thousand." This is only fifty American dollars. I looked at Noor, who clutched the door handle with both hands.

"Twenty-five," Motorcycle shouted.

Al had had his fun. He wasn't an antiques dealer. He stepped on the gas and we soon outran Motorcycle. Noor put her worry beads back in her purse. She smiled again as we sped down the mountains, out into the flat plains toward Aleppo, away from the ancient Roman roads, the broken columns, the mountain jinns who go out in the night to probe the secret graves of the old Phoenicians. I am sure the daring Motorcycle was not a jinn — well, almost.

One of my university students frequently insisted that good jinns and bad jinns always are all around us. Though many Syrians took such superstitions seriously,
I gave no credence to these fairy tales of Middle Eastern literature. Still, when we were with the Gregorians, Mat and Margo, and other friends, I sometimes wondered if the good jinns surrounded them, and when I was in the English chair's office at the university, I felt a presence that might have been a bad jinn, but surely could not be.

Mel's Compass

Each adventure in Syria confirmed our feelings of being in what for us was a country of mystery. While we expected to be puzzled, sometimes, usually to our surprise, we found we were mysterious to Syrians. Mel became unexpectedly mysterious when he helped chaperone a camping trip for ICARDA students. The problem was his compass.

To find his way around Aleppo's nameless and twisting streets, Mel wore a small compass on a strap around his neck. Using the compass was natural to Mel, who had been a surveyor just after high school, but it arouse the suspicions of Syrian locals. Surely, they thought, this was part of a spy's secret equipment.

The school planned a camping trip for a group high school boys and girls. Syrians didn't camp. Only the Bedouins did, and they were generally not respected members of society. The Western penchant for camping mystified locals, and no Syrian parents gave permission for their students to go. Only children of the foreign scientists participated. Of course, government permission was necessary to allow students and faculty chaperones to set up their tents and supplies for a weekend at the chosen camping spot, which featured a swimming place near the river.

On a bright Saturday morning, the campers assembled at the school to board a bus to the campsite. To everyone's surprise, a carload of police appeared. They had been assigned to "provide security." The school hadn't asked for any "security," and everyone was put off by the officious way the police inserted themselves into the outing. Who sent them? And why? So, upon their arrival an unexpectedly large entourage paraded into the pleasant meadow where a bend in the river had scooped out a natural swimming pool. Soon all were busy, setting up their tents, making a fire pit, joking and laughing.

The faculty knew it would be essential to keep students occupied and interested, so they planned a lot of activities. Using his compass, Mel

began to set up one of these. He laid out a course across the meadow that students would have to use his compass to follow. This would be an excellent challenge for high school students. As he walked his course, two strangers suddenly appeared. They wore the traditional *galabeya*. Mel suspected one of them was a woman, although she was dressed like a man. They appeared to be shepherds, but they did not carry the usual crooks. Instead, he could see that both carried rifles beneath their voluminous robes. In Syria it was illegal for anyone except police, military and official guards to have a gun. The two strangers confronted Mel belligerently, demanding to know what he was doing. At least that's what he surmised, as they had almost no English, and he had almost no Arabic. They focused attention on the compass, and he tried to explain its use to them, but without a common language, this proved futile.

Seeing the strangers talking with Mel, two of the police escort hurried out to see what was going on. At this point the two shepherds hastily disappeared like jinns into the air. The police escorts couldn't or wouldn't explain the menacing strangers. Fortunately, they never reappeared, but the faculty remained on alert. Who were they? Why did they appear and vanish so suddenly and completely? We knew about Syria's sixteen different security agencies who spied on everyone and each other. But no one had said they had magical powers.

When all the campers went in for an afternoon swim, the police were shocked that boys and girls swam together. This wasn't done! The hotel pool where Mel swam every morning was for men only, except that two afternoons a week it was for women only. After the campers finished their swim, one of the policemen admired Mel's swim suit and indicated he wanted it. Although this was obviously a shakedown, Mel gave it to him.

It became apparent the police guards planned to stay until the group returned to Aleppo. As the police seemed unprepared to feed themselves, the faculty decided they would graciously invite them to eat with the group.

After the meal and the songs and stories around the campfire, the students went to their tents and sleeping bags. Mel and another teacher stayed to put out the campfire and make sure it was completely dead. Then, having seen too many of the luridly advertised American films, the police demanded that the chaperones bring out the cigarettes and whisky. They were certain all Westerners smoked incessantly and drank hard liquor constantly. Of course, on a school outing, there was no tobacco or alcohol, but despite the amused denials, the security escort seemed unconvinced that there were no big bottles of whisky somewhere among the supplies.

In Aleppo the American films, dubbed in Arabic, were advertised with enormous posters, almost always displaying a blonde in a desperate situation. Actually, every scene that might be sexual or even suggestive had been excised by the Syrian censors who were protecting the morals of Syrian men. Instead of "sex," the films provided plenty of other vices and violence. I despised the American film makers and marketers who distributed these horribly violent films in the overseas market. They portrayed mainly a dark side of America, filled with vicious mayhem, and featured heroes who displayed their masculinity with constant smoking and drinking in night clubs and bars.

How difficult it is to understand people of a different culture! We were never able to unravel some mysteries. The mystery of the two shepherds with long guns was never explained. The unwanted "security escorts" went back to their police stations, until called to "escort" some other internationals, and the secret sands of Syria sifted in the wind as they had done for centuries.

Medical Adventures

We had the misfortune of two hospitalizations while in Aleppo, but we also had an inside look at a surprisingly good health care system for a developing country, and we met several interesting doctors. From the Gregorians and their two daughters, interns at the Children's hospital in Aleppo, we learned much about the Syrian health care system. The government provided free medical education to those who could test into it. Graduates who could not afford to have their own offices, called dispensaries, were obligated to practice in one of Syria's many villages for at least two years. Health care was free for everyone in these dispensaries. When a case came to a village doctor beyond his or her expertise, or for which the dispensary had no equipment, the patient could go into the nearest city to the free government hospital. Dr. Marie Anna Gregorian, who was in training to be a pediatrician, found that in the winter time, babies who had contracted pneumonia and needed oxygen often came in from the villages to the Children's Hospital. The system worked well. As a foreigner, I had to pay for my care, but Fulbright insurance reimbursed my medical expenses.

My Hospital Adventure

One morning soon after settling in our first-year flat, I stayed home instead of going to the office as usual. I didn't feel like eating breakfast, but I put some food on the table for Mel. Preparing meals was entirely different in Syria. Reports of the previous Fulbrights in Syria cautioned we should wash all fruits and vegetables in boiled water with a little Clorox, and use only boiled water for brushing our teeth. I had heard dire warnings about never eating grapes on my previous visit. I believed I had been suitably careful, but it turned out, not careful enough. Thinking optimistically that I would get better as the morning unfolded, I said nothing to Mel.

After breakfast, Mel left for his morning swim. He had found a swimming pool at a hotel, near the university, and he bicycled there every morning for his swim, just as he would have gone to the YMCA in Cedar Rapids. During the hour after he left, I grew worse. Still, I went about my usual morning tasks, washing the dishes, and making the bed. Soon, however, I realized that I had to get Mel to come home and take me to the doctor. The diplomats in Damascus had given me a list of doctors recommended to treat Americans, but in Aleppo there was only one, and there was no address. I called the hotel, and soon Mel was soon at the door.

In our street, he was lucky to flag down a taxi. Mel gave him the doctor's name. The driver looked at him and asked him something in Arabic we couldn't understand. We had discovered by then that there were no numbers for houses or businesses in Aleppo. People identified places by sections of the city and by specific landmarks. We had no idea where the doctor's office was. Our driver shrugged and started out, but stopped from time to time to call to the group of men always standing on every corner; we guessed he was asking them where to find this doctor. He was not satisfied with any of the answers, and I was feeling much worse. I could hardly sit up. At the second or third stop, one man spoke to the driver and then jumped in beside him, all the time pointing directions. We were beginning to see how often ordinary Syrians were good Samaritans. Soon after that stop, we arrived, and Mel had to help me walk in.

The doctor, who appeared quickly, was gray haired, probably just past middle age, with a pleasant smile. He spoke English with an accent, but was perfectly understandable. He told us he had gone to medical school in the states, but confessed that for lack of practice, his English was bad. He took my temperature, noted my trembling and weakness, asked me about why I was in Syria and nodded in appreciation when I explained I was a professor preparing to teach American Literature at the university. He told me I had acquired one of the bugs the local people were immune to, and I would have to stay there in his hospital for a few days. "She's dehydrated, and we have to get that fixed immediately," he said, giving Mel a slip of paper, and sending him around the corner to a pharmacy to get a bottle of the IV prescription. We were surprised to learn that getting the necessary meds in Syria always meant sending someone to the pharmacy. Mel set off, and a nurse took me upstairs to a spotless room where the window had a view of the railway station. She made me as comfortable as possible and brought in the stand for the IV bottle that Mel brought from the pharmacy.

The hospital furniture was of the same vintage as I remembered from my hospital stay in the Spirit Lake, Iowa, hospital when I was ten years old in 1940. It was iron, painted white, and the patient's position in the bed was regulated by a hand crank. The nurses didn't speak English. Just down the hall, I could hear a cacophony of voices, and many footsteps passed my door. After a while I guessed an older man was the patient, and his numerous family was gathering around him. When the doctor came in to check on me, he explained the hospital did not serve meals as American hospitals did. Instead the family brought in food, solving the mystery of the traffic down the hall. The doctor arranged for delivery of my meals, and at lunch time a nice plate of vegetables arrived. Not very hungry, I ate a little. I was getting better. I

managed to use a few Arabic words and hand signals to ask a nurse to bring me a glass of water. She did, carrying it by the rim. A doctor friend had warned us about nurses' training in Syria. Almost always when drinks were served anywhere, the glasses were not washed between customers. That was accepted and common. In fact, in the foyer to the English Chairman's office, a pitcher of water and one common glass sat on the coffee table for the male faculty members who sometimes congregated there in the afternoon after classes. How easy, I thought, for me to return often to the hospital unless I was very, very careful.

Traditionally nurses had no scientific training, and at this time there weren't enough trained nurses in Syria. The government recently had instituted a nursing program at Aleppo University, but it was difficult to get students to enroll. No men would consider nursing because that was "women's work." Female members of a family were responsible for care of the ill, injured, or old. Women were reluctant to enroll because the calling had a bad reputation in the Arab world; these women would have to care for men who weren't members of their immediate family, and perhaps (horrors of horrors!) they would see a naked man. There were few daughters whose parents would let them go into nursing, and most were themselves reluctant to risk the stigma.

My nurse was very kind in caring for me, fluffing my pillows and bringing me an extra blanket (which I didn't need), but she didn't have the advantage of training. I hoped that whatever germs might come from the rim of my water glass would be offset by the medicines in the IV.

As I began to improve, I watched the train station through my window. This was the historic terminal where British mystery writer Agatha Christie had arrived from her trip on the Orient Express. That night I had dreams of departing to Istanbul, then to Paris on that fabled train. Shortly after I woke up, I regretfully watched a train leave the station. The Orient Express was pulling away without me, leaving me prone in the hospital. After a few days, I was back to myself, and the doctor dismissed me. When I got home and told Mahmoud about my dream trip, he discouraged me. "The Orient Express doesn't come as far as Aleppo now," he explained. "And the rolling stock on this line is still unchanged from the 1920's." Later, in 2009 when Mel and I visited Aleppo again, we took a modern train from that station to the port city of Latakia, but that train wasn't the Orient Express.

After recovering I was anxious to get back to my academic routine. It is always good to leave a hospital cured, although the doctor, worried I might be run down (I didn't think so, but I wasn't a doctor of medicine) gave me a prescription for Vitamin B that had to be administered by injection. I was apprehensive about this. It would be too awkward for me to do it myself, considering it should be administered in the posterior.

Fortunately, this problem solved itself because the day after my hospital stay, I went for my first monthly session of the International Women's Club. There I was lucky to first meet Margo Armstrong. She introduced herself, "Mat told me Mel is volunteering on the faculty at ICARDA International School." Margo explained she was a nurse, not currently working, but just now trying to learn more about Aleppo and Syria. She had a practical air about her, and her eyes danced as if she would be fun. By the close of the luncheon we had become fast friends, and she agreed to come over that evening to give me my Vitamin B shot.

Mel's Hospital Adventure

During our second year in Aleppo, Mel tutored the teen-age son of the proprietors of Wanness, one of our favorite restaurants. Once a week he went to the flat above their downtown restaurant and helped the boy with his English. Mel was generous with his time. He never took any money from the ICARDA school, never accepted any money from the club of the Armenian young people with whom he met one evening a week to help them practice their English, and charged nothing for helping this student who attended the Armenian school. All of the students there studied Armenian, Arabic and English.

One afternoon while he was tutoring, Mel suddenly felt ill and passed out. Alarmed, Mrs. Wanness phoned her friends, the Gregorians. Mr. Petro rushed over, and he phoned Mrs. Anil's brother, the doctor.

When Mel regained consciousness, he told the doctor his symptoms were similar to those he had experienced once before in the U.S. His doctors had discovered a lesion in his esophagus. Mrs. Anil's brother looked Mel over and determined he could come home with me for the night, but he would make an appointment the next day with another friend, who was a throat specialist. Mrs. Anil's brother also managed to get Mel admitted to the French Hospital, even though officially it was full. It was the "French" hospital because it was run by French nuns, who were very efficient and very austere. It was administered with the same standards as Western hospitals.

The throat doctor, who had his medical degree from a French university, examined Mel by having him swallow the scope, which in the U.S. had gone down more easily, automatically. Yes, there was a lesion, and it was bleeding. They

would have to keep him there for treatment. The Gregorians — Mrs. Anil, Mr. Petro, Arno, and Mrs. Wanness — were almost constant visitors at his bedside. In this hospital, unlike the one where I had been treated, the meals were furnished, so it was not necessary for me to bring in his food, although still someone had to go to the pharmacy to get his meds.

This all happened just before I was scheduled to lecture on American literature at three universities in Tunisia. Mel planned to go with me. His doctor assured me that Mel was recovering nicely, and that I should feel confident leaving him. Nevertheless, I hesitated.

"No," Mel insisted. "Merely cancel my reservation. The Gregorians and Mrs. Wanness will look after me." I saw how diligent they had all been, and I knew how good they all were. Margo was also looking in on him from time to time. I also knew that Mrs. Anil's brother would keep good track of Mel's progress through his treatment.

When I consulted Margo about my dilemma, she also urged me to go. It was not easy to set up a series of lectures in the universities of foreign countries, to make all those arrangements for transportation, etc. Mat, who was very much concerned with academic schedules, told me "You'll let too many people down, if you don't go,"

I was grateful to the American diplomats in Damascus, who had arranged this with their counterparts in Tunisia. Besides the privilege of meeting other university professors and other students, I had long wanted to see Tunisia's ancient floor mosaics, which were purported to be the best ones still intact. The floors also had been recommended by Gillian, one of the diplomats in Damascus. Moreover, I was to be paid well. The Struthers family could use a lot more cash now that Mel was retired, because the company he worked for had gone bankrupt, and he now had no retirement fund except what we could save. So, I traveled as planned.

To fly to Tunisia from Damascus, we first flew to Athens. The pilot brought the plane in over a bay rather like the way I remembered coming in over the bay at New York's airport. We debarked near the shore. I fancied that I could hear the old sea of Odysseus lapping at the beach. I watched a full moon rise out of the water. It was the same moon that Odysseus and his men saw when they put out for Troy. Despite Mel's untimely illness and my having to travel alone, I felt the pull of a new adventure.

A Doctor Tells a Story

In Aleppo, we met several local doctors who had studied in the United States and were anxious to practice their English. They often invited us to their homes, where they would tell us about their needs for medical equipment. We relayed this information to the American diplomats in Damascus, and sometimes the U.S. government could help them. Occasionally, they also told us about their adventures.

We heard a memorable story one evening at dinner with Dr. al-Don, an Armenian, after we asked about Syria's wars with Israel.

"I'll tell you a true story. Because of the ladies here," he indicated me and his wife, "I'll leave out the swear words and the obscenities. You know Arabic has more swear words and obscenities than any other language." We all laughed.

"I was in the military reserves, having decided to complete my compulsory two years of active duty just after finishing the baccalaureate. In Syria, you always remain in the reserves."

Mel and I had watched the young men at the university as they marched on the parade ground once a week. I thought they looked like a rag-tag lot — no uniforms or army boots — and their marching was not impressive either. Obviously, the Syrian Army did not provide regulation clothing to trainees. We had been told that to save the expense of fuel, the Syrian Air Force could train only once a week.

Dr. al-Don's story

My military training included a lot of marching and some rifle practice. That was years ago, not long before the Six-Day war with Israel in 1967.

In June 1967, I was called up and told to report to the Army depot in Aleppo. I found my old high school buddy, Arman, in the same group of confused men who were hustled into an army truck to take us to the Golan Heights. The Heights had an almost vertical basaltic wall that fronted an extensive plateau. Rising from Israel's plains below, the heights loomed over Israel's Jordan River Valley and also the Hula Valley. The Syrian Army had established artillery on the Western edge of this Golan escarpment, and from time-to-time the guns shelled Israel below.

Our truckload of reservists followed the bumpy road through land carpeted with thick grass already brown in June. Crowds of people were walking east, away from the Israeli border, and our driver had to shout at them to make way for the truck. All along the road, they trudged with their bundles and suitcases. Twice we met a team of broken-down horses pulling a wagon loaded with people. Their faces were gray with despair and fatigue. I thought about the contrast between the gray, pathetic faces of those fleeing people and the beautiful faces of the red poppies and the few white and yellow wild flowers that were still blooming beside the path. The sun was hot, and the dust stirred up by the truck made us thirsty.

"I have a thermos of water," I told Arman.

"I have a chocolate bar, melting in my pocket. Share and share alike," Arman said.

"We're in it together," I said. I looked around at the familiar faces crowded in the back of the truck. I recognized the man who was the proprietor of a chicken rotisserie on the street near my office, the man who managed the little hardware store, and the guy who lived in a single car garage with his family. I shook my head. "Are we the brave soldiers to defend the Golan?"

"It'll be easy," Arman said.

"Is the Golan like Aleppo?" I asked. I had been to Lebanon and down to Jordan, but I had never been into the northern part of Syria. I believed it was kind of a wild place.

"'No," Arman said, "a lot of basaltic rock. Some farming, some villages, poor people. The army has fortifications up there. They can shell Israel down below."

"I don't like to be so close to the border."

"Don't worry, the Israelis can never scale that rock face. We'll be safe."

"So, it's a safe place during a war," I surmised.

"A picnic," Arman said.

I was worried less about Israeli soldiers, and more about the animals we might encounter in that wild region. "What animals are lurking in the Golan?" I asked Arman, who had studied biology at the university.

"Partridges, if we're lucky," Arman replied, patting his rifle.

"I could eat one now if we could shoot it," I said.

"There could be wolves and jackals, too, but I don't think we'll see any in broad daylight. Tonight they'll come out."

"I would rather think about a roasted partridge"

"There are snakes, too. The pythons like to wait in trees and catch their prey as they pass underneath." The truck was rapidly approaching a little grove. "They wait for the gazelles, but the gazelles are almost all gone from this area, now. Probably extinct."

After what seemed like hours, we caught sight of the Syrian positions. As we came closer, we could hear a dull roar. What could be out here in this forsaken farm country? There was a rumbling like a whole herd of big machinery. It wasn't coming from the officer's tents already set up. It sounded far away, muffled, but insistent.

"Don't worry," Arman said. "The Israelis are trying to scare us."

"They're succeeding," I replied.

"After dark, we'll look around," he said.

At that moment we heard airplanes. When we looked up, we saw a formation of Israeli jets flying toward us. Trenches had already been established, and we were ordered to jump down into the first row and spread out in a line. Arman and I slid into a trench, clutching the rifles we had been issued in the city.

The Israeli bombers flew low over us. I thought this was worse than pythons. They dropped bombs. We heard them falling, and we knew our rifles were no protection.

"We'll look around tonight, if we're here," I shouted as bombs exploded, hurling fountains of dirt and rock into the air.

We heard screaming and saw two medics rush past, carrying an officer. Rumors went up and down the line.

"The General was killed."

"Captain Ramadan was out in the open, and he got it."

"A whole trench of men was blown up."

"What do you think?" Arman asked.

"That war is shit," I said. Oh! Pardon me ladies!

After the bombers went away, the roaring went on.

"What's happening?" Arman asked. "What if the Israelis have found a way to get up here? But they can't do that. You're a doctor, you should know they can't."

"I know how to fix you, if you get wounded, but I'm deficient in military strategy."

"The Israelis are clever. They might think of a way. It's not safe here,"

A skinny kid came along, passing out bread. "What's happening?" I asked him.

"The Israelis are trying to build a road in the rock face and get up here. They're so stupid."

Arman looked at me. We both remembered that the Israelis had won the 1948 and the 1956 wars.

"Oh, and the General died," the kid went on. "That third trench behind you got blown up. Got most of the men. Allah save their souls."

That was very near. We had been lucky.

When he was gone, Arman said, "This doesn't look so good."

A soldier passed by, trying to keep to the shadows. He whispered, "The General's dead. The lieutenant has sneaked out. All the officers are gone. They're going home. The Israelis have armored troop carriers. Their infantry is on the way."

"Do you think this is true?" Arman asked.

"Should we wait to find out?" I asked him.

The sun was going down in the west. The roaring noise of the machines, probably earth movers, kept up a regular growl. The Israelis were working. The intensity and rhythm of the noise convinced us they would keep at it all night. The shadows darkened. The little scrub trees took on weird, sinister shapes.

Further down the line in the trench, muted voices muttered. Then we heard a different quieter

sound under the machinery's roar, scrapings and thuds of dirt clods falling. For a minute the clouds parted, and in the little moonlight we saw men crawling out of the trenches and walking in every direction.

"Time to go home," Arman said. "It's all over."

"It was a hell of a war." Oops! Sorry again, ladies.

We soon were standing in the middle of the road.

"What do we do now?"

"Back to Aleppo," I said.

"It's to the left," Arman said, peering into the dark, and repeating, "to the left."

"No. It's to the right," I said. Through the darkness we saw small groups of soldiers walking left — but other groups went right.

Finally, we decided to part company. "You're a stupid donkey. If you go the wrong way, you'll be captured," I told him. "Or you might walk into a pack of wolves or a herd of pythons.

"There aren't any herds of pythons; they're lone wolves, and you're a spavined camel," Arman said.

And so we parted. I worried about him. And I worried that maybe he was right. But I kept walking "back to Aleppo," one of hundreds who were fleeing the front lines.

The Israelis won in six days, and Arman, who went the wrong way, ended up in an Israeli prisoner-of-war camp for six months and then walked back to Aleppo. He came into my office when he returned and said, I walked left and encountered a pack of wolves, but I told them where the Israelis were coming through.

"What about the pythons?"

"I left them a map so they could find the Israelis"

"If you had been in charge, we would have won," I said.

"If there's another war, I'll go and live with the wolves."

"I'll go with you."

The Armenian Christian community in Aleppo supported the government that offered them some protection as a minority and because most were businessmen who need stability to thrive. Many of them were offended by the corruption in the government, but they kept silent, aware of their precarious position in a community where many hated them and their religion. Only rarely did we hear stories like this one, and then only in the privacy of a home.

Adventures in Religious Life

To us, Syria seemed a more devout society than we were used to in the U.S. Religious observances were constantly visible in everyday life, in the frequent public calls to prayer, in the normal interactions between the sexes, and, of course, in clothing choices. Care was necessary in interacting with Syrians on religious matters. One young Fulbright we knew had shocked everyone when she affirmed vigorously that she was agnostic. While Americans might disagree with her, in the U.S. she would not have provoked the strong reactions she did in here. I often had to restrain my skepticism in order to observe Syrian religious life.

The Faith Healer

One day, Arno Gregorian announced that one of the Orthodox churches was bringing a priest-healer from Canada to preach a series of sermons and hold a number of healing sessions. This priest had a reputation for preaching healing sermons and praying with people afterward, some of whom had been cured of serious health problems.

Because large crowds were expected, the priest was to hold services in the courtyard of one of the Orthodox churches, using an amplifying system to broadcast his talks into the streets outside the church compound, rather like the calls to prayer broadcast from all the mosques. So everyone could also see him, the church arranged for cameras and TVs on the balconies of nearby flats. The Christian community was excited, ready to witness modern miracles.

Of course, the church had to get permission from a government that was anxious to appear to be fair to all its citizens. The Christian community in Aleppo was strong and wealthy. But the powerful members of the dominant Sunni sect in Aleppo objected strenuously to the healing priest's visit. The government found an ingenious compromise. They allowed the priest's healing sermons to be amplified and broadcast, but also allowed the new mosque in the Christian Quarter to broadcast amplified prayers simultaneously. What a cacophony ensued! Dueling amplifiers for seven nights!

Though the spectacle intrigued me, I spared my ears and stayed away.

The whole Christian community — the Syriac Orthodox Church, the Greek Orthodox Church, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Armenian Orthodox Church, the Antiochian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church — all worked together on this special project. Arno Gregorian reported that they had been delighted with the large attendance,

and it served as an energizing project for the Christians of Aleppo. Arno, who did attend some evenings, confirmed that the crowds were enormous and included many Muslims. Some came leaning on canes, some in wheelchairs, and some were carried in by relatives. I asked him how many people were cured. "Many," he said, "including four Muslims." I was surprised that Muslims came. "Many Muslims," Arno affirmed.

I wondered afterward if the cures endured after people went home. Syria, as I was often reminded, was a land of miracles. I hoped the healing was lasting.

The government's Solomon-like decision to allow dueling sound systems illustrated the tensions between the two powerful and devout religious communities of Aleppo. Though they seemed to get along fairly well, we often heard grumblings. One of Mat Armstrong's Muslim neighbors told him, "The Christians are doing too well — making too much money. That isn't right." Our Christian friends knew that the conservative Muslim forces in the Middle East had been opposed to them for centuries, and that this hadn't changed in recent times.

Two Convents

Andrew, one of the Junior Fulbrights we met in Damascus, was finishing his Ph.D. on the Greek Orthodox church in Syria. He and his wife visited Aleppo to research an ancient convent in the mountains to the south of the city, and they invited us to go with them. This was our first experience with a convent. It was famed for a portrait of the Virgin, purported to have been painted by Saint Luke, that the Crusaders carried before them into battle for protection. The nuns allowed viewing of the painting on certain Sundays. The painting also was famous for weeping tears on occasion. In the United States I had heard of Roman Catholic paintings that wept tears, but tears of water. Here the Virgin wept holy oil. This was not the first time we were exposed to one of Syria's supernatural manifestations that aroused my skepticism. Mr. Petro Gregorian had shown us a statue of the Virgin Mary that sang from time to time. That time I was willing to draw on my literary background and for a short time to indulge in the "temporary suspension of disbelief."

When we pulled into the parking lot, I was surprised to see it nearly full of cars — after all, this was a Muslim country. Andrew explained that Muslims have a high regard for the Virgin Mary. We had also been at what was believed to be her last home in Turkey, and there, also, a large number of Muslims were paying their respects. The story of the site in Turkey was that after the crucifixion, St. John the Divine had fled there with Jesus's mother, where he wrote "Revelations." However, I knew of two other locations around the Mediterranean that claimed to be the Virgin's last home. I categorized this story with that of the painting that occasionally wept holy oil.

In the convent parking lot, Mel and I were surprised to see the female clerk, who waited on us in the Aleppo travel agent's office, get out of a car and approach the ticket booth, accompanied by a young man. All my Muslim students seemed to be forbidden to associate with a member of the opposite sex unless they were relatives or were heavily chaperoned. The Christian young people we met and that Mel held English lessons with once a week, never were allowed to go any place on dates as American young people did. I knew no matter how innocent this outing was, this girl would get a bad reputation if anyone from Aleppo saw them.

Though there was a line before the ticket booth, the wait in the glaring desert sun went quickly. In the dark interior there was another long line, people in single file, looping around past a barred window. All I could see inside was a dark red velvet curtain. I felt quite let down. Andrew excused this saying that on certain days the nuns withdrew the curtain for a few hours. Now was not the time. However, Andrew and his wife, knelt before the blank curtain, and later I saw another woman who also knelt. This veneration of an invisible weeping painting seemed odd to Mel and me, making us aware of our different provinciality.

Several weeks later we visited a second religious site, the Convent of Saint Thecla, this time with another Junior Fulbright couple. The little nuns served us coffee in miniature glasses in their living room. This was the practice in all homes we visited, and in the shops where the proprietor was anxious to keep us on the premises and looking at his goods. Though neither of us drank coffee, we didn't want to offend our hosts. This Fulbright couple, however, had perfected a system that protected the wife, who could not drink coffee. When the glasses were set before them, they both picked them up and she held hers to her lips, but then set it down on the coffee table near her husband. He drank his and then put his empty glass down near hers. Later he would drink the second.

After some pleasant conversation — the Fulbright student translating the nuns' Arabic for us — we learned their convent had been founded by a young noblewoman during the Roman era. Refusing to bow down before the shrine of the Roman emperor god, she had become one of those pesky Christians who would acknowledge only her own god. When the authorities insisted, the young woman mounted a horse and rode out toward the mountains, pursued by Roman soldiers, until she came face to face with the stone

side of the mountain. Suddenly the stones opened, and she slipped through. The Roman soldiers cursed, and they searched the entire area, but they could not find the cleft in the rock that had accepted her. Safely on the other side, she established the convent.

The nuns explained that in Maaloula, the village on the nearby cliffs, Aramaic, the language of Jesus, is still spoken by some of the people. Aramaic had been the *lingua franca* for Jesus's first century world. The nuns were saddened because fewer and fewer people were learning the language now. Today English is the world's *lingua franca*.

The nuns invited us to see their chapel. The interior was getting a new coat of white paint. They also told us that women from many different towns and even other countries, came to the convent for retreat and rest and meditation. Looking around at the lovely low mountains, and the pastel blues, pinks, and greens of the village houses on the ridge above, I could feel the peace of the place sifting into my bones. But I couldn't take the time for a retreat with the humble little nuns.

Dancing in Aleppo

Mel and I had always enjoyed dancing together. Our favorite dance was in tune with our times, the jitterbug. We thought we were good at it.

Before we were married, we danced at the Roof Garden in Arnolds Park, Iowa. This resort town was lucky to attract many of the big bands of the time. I remember dancing to Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller. In Aleppo we danced at two different kinds of wedding celebrations, and we watched the vigorous folk dances of the Armenian community. Most interesting, though, were the famous Sufi religious dancers.

We were invited to the wedding of the son of the Gregorians' friends, Mr. George and Mrs. Helena. Helena later told us her story of the Armenian genocide. This Armenian Orthodox wedding was formal and in the Armenian language, which we couldn't understand. All the priests from the various Orthodox congregations in the city participated. I regretted being too far away to be able to observe the elaborate cloaks of the clergy, but from my vantage point these vestments appeared very old, and I could see they were elaborately made and embroidered. The antique aficionado in me longed to examine them more closely.

We were surprised when, near the end of the ceremony, a whole row of women in the congregation stood up and began loudly ululating, a high-pitched trilling. This, we learned, was a collective paean of joy for the marriage.

The reception was held around the swimming pool in one of Aleppo's western hotels. Mel and I were seated with the General from Tartus and his wife. They had not attended the ceremony in the church because they were Muslims, and apparently the General thought it expedient not to be seen there. But eating and dancing together in a public place should certainly be acceptable. Soon the waiter came around and filled our wine glasses. Mel and I rarely drank, but this was a wedding. We could celebrate and toast the newlyweds. Unfortunately, Mel spilled his glass of red wine, and it splashed all over the general's white dinner jacket. Mel apologized profusely. I apologized profusely. The General was gracious and accepted the accident with equanimity, and the waiter helped him sponge off his jacket. I was sure he would never again want to see us. But he held no grudges. We later spent a weekend in the mountains with him and his wife and the Gregorians, when the General tried to kiss Mel in a traditional greeting.

We were rescued from our awkward situation when a combo began to play mostly American popular tunes. We excused ourselves to dance. This was our kind of music and our kind of dancing. We felt very happy. This was like being at home when we were young.

Soon many people were on the dance floor. The friends of the couple were dancing happily, too. Everyone seemed determined to keep the party going all night, this being a kind of joke on the wedding couple, who were assumed to want to retire to bed.

Mel and I left at about three o'clock in the morning, despite the young peoples' pleas, especially our friends from the Armenian Club, to stay and enjoy the fun. But we had to catch the early morning bus to Damascus. It had been a fine wedding and a good party. Not long thereafter we were invited to another very different wedding dance.

We had been puzzled for several evenings by what seemed to be the very loud beating of a bass drum from the vicinity of the market place, where the city had grown around a former country village. "Let's walk up to the market, and maybe we can see what's happening," I suggested. On the way we passed the stone steps to a house where every day an old woman sat coring small squash, preparing them for stuffing, and we passed the little hardware store where the polite boy, after school, helped his old grandfather. We came to a wider part of the street, where we found the drummer, beating and dancing simultaneously in the middle of a circle of dancing young people.

One of the young men in the group came to greet us, introducing himself as a student at the university. He had seen us there, and he knew who we were. He explained that the drum and

dancing were parts of a wedding celebration for his sister. Other young men brought chairs for us to sit beside the circle of dancers. The circle included both men and women holding hands. Later a traditionalist on the faculty told me that these village people didn't know any better — that good Muslim men did not touch — and often did not even speak — to a woman who was not a relative. The villagers were very ignorant in many ways, he said. "They paint pictures of vines and flowers around the doorway of anyone who has taken the pilgrimage to Mecca. Very ignorant." But I thought the dancing and the paintings were charming.

As we watched, another young man brought out cool water and a glass. This was a common glass, but we knew enough to be polite and risk a drink. Then our host asked us if we cared to join the dancers. Mel looked at the fast-paced circle and declined, but I was game. Two dancers broke hands and let me in. Soon I was stumbling round and round in the circle with them. I never quite mastered the step, although it seemed to me somewhat like the Jewish Hora I had seen, when a dancer sponsored by the Iowa Arts Council taught it in our children's grade school.

I was a little embarrassed to be dancing here because we were at a wedding of people we did not know and had brought no present. Before we left, I asked the student what kind of presents people gave the couple. "Household," he said, "Sugar, rice, tea."

We had heard the drumming for two nights now, so Mel asked, "How long does the wedding celebration go on?"

"Every night for a week."

Mel and I were getting tired, and I had student papers to read, so we decided to go home. The next night we came briefly to the party again, bringing a large package of sugar and a bouquet. Practical gifts are fine, but I thought that brides should always have flowers.

Both wedding dances, though very different from each other, were dances of joy, for love. In Syria, there were other good reasons for dancing. Arno Gregorian told us about a summer fair that the government sponsored at Bosra to exhibit the various kinds of folk dancing in the country. At Bosra there were ancient Greek ruins, including an amphitheater where the dancers performed. Unfortunately, we were never able to attend this, but we were fortunate to attend a folk dance performance in Aleppo that the Armenian Young Peoples' Club sponsored. They practiced for weeks, and the night of the performance, we were given the best seats in the house.

First the young men performed a dance that featured a great deal of stomping and kicking. They formed a line, arms around the next man's shoulders. When the tempo of the music accelerated, they sank into squats, with their legs kicking outward, all the while keeping their balance. This "Cossack dance" required great strength and balance. I should not have been surprised to see the young men dancing many of the steps I associated with Russia. After all, Armenia adjoined Russia, and had been one of the Soviet Socialist States.

Although the men's dance was remarkable, even more wonderful was one that featured the young Armenian women in traditional Armenian costumes. These dresses trailed on the floor, hiding their feet. The effect was so smooth and delicate that it gave the illusion that they were floating. I wondered what kind of steps made them seem to move as effortlessly as clouds in the sky. Later I learned that this takes a lot of practice.

Most spectacular was a round dance: in a circle holding hands, with every third dancer a woman. At one point all the hands were dropped, and then pairs of men joined hands and lifted the nearest woman onto the bridge made by their arms. The circle danced on round and round, the women sitting on the arm bridges. I wondered how long the bridges could be maintained. Many of the young women were slim, but several were quite substantial. I held my breath, but all the arms held. It ended when the women gracefully leaped down.

In addition to wedding dances and folk dances, we enjoyed the religious dances of the Sufi. Although the majority of Muslims in Aleppo were Sunni, there was a substantial number of the Sufi, a branch of adherents to a mystical interpretation of Islam. The center of Sufism was at Konya, Turkey, about 640 kilometers from Syria's northern border. The great Sufi poet, Rumi (1207-1273), buried at Konya, is revered throughout the Middle East. In the West, the Sufi dancers are known as whirling dervishes. The Sufis pursue a path that they believe leads to closeness with Allah. Their dance is a kind of meditation, cultivating spiritual oneness through concentration on music and repetitive movement.

I first saw them several years earlier when I was in Syria with the Malone grant and our group was invited to a performance. We were cautioned that we were seeing a religious service; the dance was liturgical, not a performance. All of us professors were dutifully quiet and respectful.

The service was held in the courtyard of an ancient hospital, its patients long since gone to their maker. First to appear was an older man carrying a medium-sized drum. He held the drumhead toward a small pot of coals, tuning the drum by heating its sheep-leather drumhead. In my hometown high school band, the drummers tightened their drum heads with a series of screws around the metal rim. Here we saw a much older technique.

Another robed man appeared at the far end of a stage, playing a short pipe, called a *ney*, the favorite instrument of Rumi. Its sound was high and sweet. Rumi wrote of this music:

"Listen to the reed and the tale it tells;
how it sings of separation."

The song evoked, for me, the lone shepherd on the grass plain with nothing but his sheep and the everlasting sky.

A group of ten men wearing very high, brown, fez-shaped hats appeared. Their shirts resembled black leotard tops, and they wore long white skirts that reached to the floor. They spaced themselves out on the dance floor and began turning in slow circles. Their leader, the drummer, walked among them in his traditional Arab robe, carrying his drum. As the dancers moved faster, their skirts began to bell out, and I could tell they were weighted at the hem to keep the circle of fabric extended. The drum tempo increased, and the dancers whirled faster. Their long, white skirts whirled into large upside down umbrellas. As the tempo changed, the skirts became great, white tents. I did not see how they could keep from getting dizzy and falling over. Just watching them made me dizzy.

The drummer stepped out of the circle to bring in a boy with a small drum. Then two drummers kept the dancers going. We were told later that the old drummer had chosen the boy by a mystic ritual, and the boy would eventually become the leader of the group. These worshipping dancers were lovely, calm, and reverent.

In 1997 Mat and Margo heard from one of the parents of a local student at ICARDA that a Sufi dance was to be given on a stage in a theater for a visiting dignitary. I was excited by this chance for Mel to see them. They arranged for all of us to attend. We arrived early and found the best seats. I was sure Mel would be impressed by the beautiful, calm scene I had experienced a few years earlier.

As others arrived, it became clear this was going to be an exclusive and important event. The coffee seller brought around his enormous pot with its space at the bottom for hot coals. This coffee was strong enough to keep you awake for three days. He poured into the traditional tiny glass cups. We noted that he collected and refilled these cups for others, like the street water sellers. We grew accustomed to seeing this, but never warmed to the prospect of joining in.

We thought we were on time, but apparently the show would start on what I had come to understand as Syrian time — not at the announced time, but later, when some key person was ready. The coffee man came around again. When the coffee man made his third round, almost an hour after we walked in the door, we thought perhaps something had gone wrong and the dance would be cancelled.

Then came an official, speaking Arabic. He moved us back three rows because some *important* people were to have our seats at the front. We dutifully moved back for the mayor and the governor and others in the "important entourage" to file in and take the seats we had warmed for them.

Finally, a man with a big drum appeared on stage, followed by a group dressed just as I remembered them. This drummer had a modern drumhead and did not need to warm it over coals. The dancing began as I remembered, but soon other, different dancers appeared, not all dressed traditionally. There was no *ney* at this event, and the drum was bigger and louder. Some of the non-traditional dancers made remarks for the crowd that brought laughter. Not understanding Arabic, we didn't get the jokes. The dancing stopped momentarily while an official spoke with the dancers' leader. Though we could understand none of it, this didn't seem to be part of the dance. Then the dancing began again, and one of the non-traditionally clad dancers in the front pulled out a sword. The audience gasped. He waved it about and finally stabbed himself in the side, pushing the weapon in to its hilt. This brought another collective gasp from the audience. Margo, a nurse, pointed out to us that there was no blood. "The sword must be collapsible," she said.

Although this performance was far different from the serene reverent dance I had experienced previously, it apparently was good entertainment for the audience.

I had seen two examples of religious dancing, participated in two wedding dances, and had watched energetic folk dancing. Dancing for spiritual presence and entertainment, for wedding joy and cultural expression all were important in Syria. The local Lutheran church in my small Iowa town had forbidden dancing, even at the public school, but here dancing was a regular part of life. Long live the dance!

The Diplomats

Main Persons

Gillian, with an office at the American Center, our main embassy contact.

Lucille Morgan, Director of the American Center.

Jim Wilson, assistant ambassador.

For reasons that remain obscure, there was no local Fulbright Committee in Syria. Apparently, this deviation from the normal arrangements was the result of the Baath Party's desire to dictate to the American Fulbright organization. As a result, American Embassy staff oversaw Fulbright grantees in Syria.

The American diplomats were a high-powered group. All very well-educated and highly intelligent. When we first arrived, Christopher Ross was the ambassador. He was a career diplomat, very different from politically appointed ambassadors. He was fluent in Arabic, which was useful and politically respectful, because English had a bad reputation there as a colonial language. I was introduced to him and his wife, but we didn't meet often, and I didn't get to know them well.

Soon after our arrival, Ambassador Ross gave an evening party in the embassy garden, celebrating fifty years of the Fulbright program. Important people in Damascus and Aleppo were invited, and two men from Aleppo University introduced themselves, the Chair of the English Department and another man, who a year later became Dean of the Department of Language and Literature. After a hot August day, the desert evening was cool, and the Ambassador's wife had chairs and couches set out on the grass with beautiful silk scarves thrown over them. I was introduced and said a few words in English about how glad I was to be there. If only I could have spoken in Arabic!

The life of a diplomat could seem glamorous, but they were always under scrutiny by the Syrian secret police as well as the public, and were forbidden to travel in some parts of the country. There were social values and customs to adjust to as well. Perhaps they were better at adjusting than we were. And they put in long hours. There were important evening dinners they were obligated to attend. In Syria, dinners began at nine o'clock or ten. They frequently lasted until midnight or one o'clock. Our government expected diplomats to be in their offices again at eight-thirty in the morning. As we got to know the diplomatic staff, we were impressed by how hard they all worked.

When we first arrived in Syria, Gillian from the diplomatic staff met us at the airport in Damascus. A diminutive, hard-working woman, she was the primary contact for the Fulbright students and faculty. She introduced us to the other diplomats including Lucille Morgan, the chief administrator at the American Center, and Jim Wilson, the assistant ambassador, who later drove us to Aleppo and introduced us to university officials. Wilson had connections with Coe College. Before my time, his grandfather had been a history professor there. Jim was divorced. His former wife and two young daughters lived in the States. He impressed us as an exemplary diplomat: friendly, well-educated, well-read, a good conversationalist in English and Arabic. We saw him as a young man on his way up.

Gillian and Lucille kept an eye on us throughout our time in Syria, and we often were in contact with them. Gillian's office was at the American Language Center, a few blocks from the embassy. Upon our arrival, she took charge of us. After Mel and I recovered a little from jet lag, we were ready to go to her to deposit our American dollars in the safe. In pockets under our clothing, we had brought $10,000 in cash with us for daily expenses. This was an awkward but necessary arrangement, for Syria had no banking system at this time.

When we entered the office area, we first met the Center's secretary, a young local woman. She was fluent in English, and she knew where important sites were and how to contact important people. She probably knew everything about the American Embassy staff. I came to wonder if she had to report to al-Assad's government.

Gillian gave us a tour of the Center, and was careful to take us to the second floor bathroom, where there was a rope ladder beneath the window sill. It was ready for a secret getaway if necessary. I knew there was much tension between the governments of United States and Syria. Here was unsettling proof that diplomats in Syria had to take precautions.

Lucille and Janie

When Gillian introduced us to her, Lucille Morgan asked about our children. Mel explained they were all adults and living with their own families. Then she showed us the pictures on her desk. One showed two grade school children, her niece and nephew. The other she picked up and handed to us: "My Janie and her nannie." She paused and then remarked. "It's so hard to keep nannies." Later Gillian told us Lucille had adopted this little girl because she wanted a family, even though she had not married. In the 1990s, Lucille was a trailblazer, for then it was rare for a single woman to adopt. We were fated to become quite close to Lucille and Janie.

Both Mel and I missed children. We had felt lonesome when our youngest daughter went away

to college. Soon after she left, Mel was delighted to meet the three-year-old son of a new neighbor. The boy tossed his ball to Mel, and soon they were playing football in the yard. Mel was especially fond of babies and little kids. When we first returned to Damascus to get money from the safe, Lucille invited us to stay in her guestroom. She confided, "I worry about Janie not having any male influences." Then, looking at Mel, she continued, "She needs a grandfather." Mel enthusiastically volunteered. Janie turned out to be a beautiful and lively child. I liked children too, but I took more pleasure from working with college students.

Six months later, Lucille phoned. "I'm coming to Aleppo for meetings that will last all week. I think it's not a good idea for me to be away from Janie for that time. She gets so anxious without me."

"We'll be glad to see you both," I said. "You can stay with us."

"Well," Lucille said, "I'll have some evening meetings, and you know how late those dinners are, so I wondered," she hesitated, "if Janie could stay with you."

"Of course," I said, "and Mel will be delighted."

"It won't be any extra work for you," Lucille went on. "I'm bringing her nannie, too."

"I'll put them in the son's bedroom," I said. Mel and I had chosen to sleep in what had been the girl's room, because it was lighter and brighter. The son's bedroom was small and dark, but it had the best beds. We used it to store our coats for winter and our luggage.

"It's strange," Mel said, "that Janie and the nannie aren't staying with Lucille in the hotel."

I reminded him of the "Grandpa thing."

"It seems to me that there's more to it," he said, doubtfully. Still, we both were glad to once again have a child in the house.

Janie was happy to see us, and almost couldn't stop hugging Mel. The nannie, Bisira, a good-looking young woman, had a diffident air. I thought that I must be especially nice, so she would feel comfortable. She prepared Janie's meals all the time they were with us. Lucille had sent along enough food for a month. Lucille's schedule allowed her to eat breakfast with us each morning and the one evening when she didn't have a dinner. Her instructions to Bisira emphasized she was not to smoke.

The first evening after we ate, Bisira retired to the little bathroom, and I soon smelled smoke. I knocked on the door and said, "Lucille doesn't want you to smoke; she thinks it's a bad influence on Janie, and we don't like smoke in our house."

She emerged from the bathroom, laughed and said, "*Tant pis*." She thought I wouldn't understand the French insult.

"*Mademoiselle,*" I said, "*ça n'est pas appropriée.*"

The next morning at breakfast Bisira's smile lacked sincerity.

Mel suggested Janie might like a walk in nearby Sabile Park to see the fountains. When Syria was a French protectorate, the French had built this park that featured a number of spectacular fountains. Syrian families often came there to sit on the benches and watch the falling waters. Usually there was a balloon man, a candy seller, and a man who sold sodas. Soon the pair was off, and I went to my office. In this way the week passed, Bisira, we could tell by the smell, sneaking a smoke whenever she thought she could.

The evening before they were supposed to depart for Damascus, Lucille phoned; she was all in a flurry. "I have to go to an emergency meeting in Ankara," she said. "Bisira should take Janie back to Damascus. I'll be there in several days." So, the next morning, we kissed the little girl goodbye, shook hands with Bisira, and put them on the bus.

The following morning when I was getting ready to go to the university, Mel asked me, "Have you seen the black shoe polish?" I helped him look in the closet where we kept it.

"It's not there." We looked at each other.

After a thoughtful pause, he said, "I want to take the camera with me to school to get a shot of my tennis team, but I don't know where it is."

"You left it on the living room table."

"I looked. It's not there." We both knew then what must have happened.

"We need to check the luggage we stored on top shelves of the bedroom closet," I said. "We put two hundred dollars in a pocket of the little one."

We had thought that was a good place for money. No robber would think to look there. But the cash was gone. We didn't anticipate a robber who was a guest. She had plenty of time when we were away.

"What else did she take?" I wondered.

"I'll look for the booze," Mel said. We kept a bottle of ouzo for Mr. Gregorian and a bottle of Scotch for the ICARDA people. He closed the cupboard door. "Gone too."

Then the phone rang. It was Gillian. "I thought you should know that I had a call from Lucille's neighbors, the Swedish couple next door, and they said that Janie was with them. They don't know what happened to Bisira."

"Is Janie all right?" Mel asked.

"Yes, she's all right, the Olsons are good people, although she barely knows them. They phoned our department last night when Janie showed up at their door. No one was here, so they kept her. Now Janie wants to go home."

"I'll catch the next bus down," Mel said, "and stay until Lucille gets back."

"We tried to locate Bisira, but she disappeared into the million Arabs in this city. Lucille's on her way home, but she can't get here until tomorrow morning."

After Lucille got home, she confessed to Mel that Bisira had no passport and no papers — she was an illegal alien Lucille had found in Algeria. In Syria everyone had to give their passport to the desk clerk when registering at a hotel, and Bisira didn't have one, so she couldn't stay with Lucille and Janie. "It's so hard to find a good nannie," Lucille apologized, and this time we had reason to agree, especially with "good. "

Gillian told Mel more of the story when he arrived. Lucille had trouble keeping a nannie because she always fired her as soon as Janie became attached. "The child can't help loving the person she's with all day long. Lucille wants all of Janie's love, and she can't share it." Gillian apologized to Mel for divulging this observation, but she thought Mel and I would want to understand.

We could only guess what Bisira had stolen from Lucille's flat. Lucille admitted she had taken a suitcase. We were pretty sure she crammed it full of Lucille's valuables. She would have no problem selling everything on the black market in Damascus.

When Lucille thanked Mel for coming to stay with Janie, she asked him if Bisira had taken anything from our flat. Mel told her what was missing. Lucille wanted to reimburse us for the stolen things and the money, but he declined. Our friendship with Lucille was worth much more than two hundred dollars. Furthermore, we were partly to blame. We had been careless. There were so many situations in Syria that we hadn't anticipated. Bisira was richer; we were poorer, but Janie was safe.

Gillian and Jim Wilson

The diplomats saw that we were invited to all the official parties. Because we were in Aleppo, we could not attend parties at the ambassador's home in Damascus, but in early 1998, during our second year in Syria, we accepted an invitation.

"There's going to be a party for all the Fulbrights in the country and part of the diplomatic corps," Gillian said on the phone. "It's Saturday night. Jim's having it at his place? Can you come? It will be fun. I'm arranging the whole thing." Gillian knew how to give a good party, and we were glad to be able to go.

"We wouldn't miss it." I said.

By this time, we knew many of the diplomatic staff and most of the year's Junior Fulbrights, and several of them had become fast friends.

"You can have my flat all to yourselves," Gillian invited. "I won't be there."

We had heard the rumor that Gillian was smitten and was now living with Jim. So, although Jim was giving the party, Gillian was making the arrangements and doing all the work. I thought she would make an ideal diplomat's wife.

Jim was an attractive prospect. However, I had heard rumors about another young woman from the Italian Embassy who had attended diplomatic events with Jim. Our doctor friends said there were at least two local employees of the embassy who were interested in him. Although he was divorced, with a former wife and children in the States, he was considered a good catch.

At the party were several of the new Junior Fulbrights we had met during their orientation. One was Tiffany, a tall, gangly woman who had stayed with us while she was researching the former Jewish community in Aleppo. She stayed several times, enjoying meals at our flat and in the local restaurants. She was always happy to let us pay, just as our own kids would be. This was okay with us, but we never received a thank-you note. This was her second time in the Middle East. Mel and I wondered whether she was one of those perpetual students who found grants and scholarships one after another, so they could live in exotic places, instead of returning to the States and finding a job.

Across the room was Ken, the youngest of the Junior Fulbrights. He had planned to meet his parents in England over the Christmas break, but on a bus through Turkey he met a young man who befriended him and invited him to share his hotel room. Always short of money, Ken accepted. The next morning, he awoke in an empty room, without money, passport or clothes. Even his shoes were gone. He managed to get to the American consulate at Izmir and phone his parents. By the time all his complications were straightened out, his parents had had to return home. Some of the other Junior Fulbrights laughed at Ken's naiveté. But remembering Bisira the thief, we did not laugh. We suspected they were not as sophisticated as they pretended.

Marilyn, another Fulbright, appeared with a kitten, which she presented to the group. It was a gray and white striped kitten of the kind we saw daily, scouting the dumpsters on every street corner. It was thin and sickly, with eyes full of matter, and she dabbed at its face with a Kleenex she kept on her lap. Why, I wondered, had she brought it here? When it began to meow plaintively, someone thought to put it in one of Jim's potted plants, where it primly defecated. A wag suggested this was a comment on the regime. Jim gave him a warning look, but we all laughed just the same.

During the party, Jim Wilson passed the drinks. When he opened several packages of potato chips. Mel and I exchanged an astonished look. We had seen no potato chips in the local stores! These must be from a stash for diplomats.

When the party was over, I followed Gillian to the kitchen and asked her if I could help her clean up. I saw she was in tears. She hurriedly wiped them with a dish towel and forced a smile.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Can you tell me?"

"Jim is being sent to Morocco."

"Are you going?"

Then her tears gushed out, and she tried to wipe them away with the already wet dish towel. "He didn't ask me."

I waited to see if she wanted to tell me more.

"I still have two years left here in Syria," she explained. Then I understood. U.S. policy was to keep professional diplomats in the same country only three years and then require them to return to the States for a year. As I understood it, the three-year policy was to keep diplomats from becoming so involved and sympathetic with the nation where they served that they lost perspective. Returning home kept the diplomats in touch with the changing society in the U.S. as well. Gillian was in her first year in Syria.

Clearly, Gillian and Jim could have found some way to stay together if they wanted to. For example, they could marry, and then leave together. Or they could have found a way for her to join him in Morocco as soon as her two years were up. Even if they couldn't be together, they could plan on taking their vacations together. But none of this was going to happen, and so Gillian was crying into the dishtowels. What could I say? Gillian was so able and hardworking, a good diplomat, a fine mentor for the Junior Fulbrights, and such a help to me and Mel. She had organized this party and all the diplomatic gatherings Jim was obligated to host.

As I looked at her small form bent over the dishpan, I imagined her through Jim's eyes. She was short and too thin. Her tear-streaked face would be thought pretty perhaps as long as you admired freckles. I wished I could find her a copy of *Women Who Love Too Much*, a book I had given to my son's girlfriend when he dumped her.

Diplomats and Spies

The diplomats were very careful about security. One day when we wanted to take a picture of Gillian in front of the American Center, she demurred and stepped across the street, so that the background was not an American building, but a neighbor's garden. Mel and I had been warned, and we were as careful as we could be and still be our American selves. We knew that the Syrian secret police were keeping careful track of us. Diplomats had to be even more circumspect. Gillian said that one day when she had first come to her job in Damascus, she became confused and could not find her apartment house. All the entrances looked the same. Certain that she was already well known to Syria's security people, she asked the guard at the end of her street which door was hers. He easily pointed it out for her.

Although the American Embassy was guarded by six marines, the diplomats' homes were not. The diplomats told us a mob had once attacked the home of American Ambassador Ryan Crocker. In Syria there could be no gathering unless sanctioned by the government, so it was obvious the government knew and perhaps had instigated it. The day of the attack, the Ambassador wasn't in Damascus, but his wife was. Conditions became frightening, and she took their dog with her to the safe room. Before evening, the powers in charge must have decided they had made their point, and withdrew the mob.

At various times, I had several brief conversations with Mrs. Crocker, and when she told me they had been married in Bagdad, I responded, "What a romantic setting!"

"Not at all," she explained. "It was a city of mud brick houses and no trees."

All the diplomats tried very hard to make sure the Fulbrights were safe. When Mel and I came back from our trip to Jordan and reported in at the American Center, Gillian rushed us into her office. "Do not take the bus back to Aleppo," she said. "I'll tell you when it's safe to return."

We were astounded. "There was a bombing at the terminal."

"Was anyone killed?" Mel asked.

"No, only wounded."

"Any Americans involved?" I asked.

"No," she said. "but we have to be especially careful now."

In the background we could hear the press spokesperson for the embassy on the phone, her voice carefully controlled and friendly. "No Americans killed or wounded. The government is looking into the causes. That's all the information we have."

"She's been getting calls from reporters all over the world."

I didn't know whether the diplomats knew more than they were telling us. Mel and I often speculated about which one of the diplomats was in the Central Intelligence Agency. We never figured it out. However, both of us were sure the American embassy knew more than they were telling reporters over the phone. From their contacts all over the country, they probably suspected even more.

One prime suspect for the bombing was the Muslim Brotherhood, international Sunni Islamists. President al-Assad had tried to wipe them out, but there were probably still sympathizers in Syria. Or the bombers could have been the Kurds or the Druze, opposition tribes with a reputation for ferocity. Or perhaps it was a business problem. Did someone not pay the bribe they were assessed? Or one of Syria's neighbors may have been responsible. Turkey had long coveted northern Syria. The Middle East was a hotbed of old rivalries, and Syria was a prize because of its geographical position and because of its recent economic progress.

Because the diplomats were so insistent that we stay in Damascus until circumstances changed and we could only wait in ignorance, it was easy to feel paranoia. We began to wonder if someone had wanted to scare us in particular, or even worse. We dismissed that idea. Ann and Mel Struthers were not that important. Still, such fears were hard to shake.

"You can stay in my flat," Gillian said. Were comfortable but anxious the rest of that week, until we could return to our teaching and our flat. There was one compensation. I believe the American diplomats had the only clothes dryers in the country. In Aleppo, I hung our laundry on a line in the sun, which dried them in the desert air almost instantly. But Gillian's dryer took out the wrinkles, which the sun, despite its benevolence, did not.

Of course, we never found out who had been responsible for the bomb. The only tangible result was that the buses serving Damascus no longer had a terminal, and they parked alongside a road out in the open.

Another time, Gillian telephoned a warning. "A Saudi Arabian national has threatened all Americans living anywhere in the Middle East. You should pack a bag and make plans, so that if I give you the signal, you can leave Syria immediately." I packed the bag, but I didn't worry. Maybe I should have. The Saudi's name meant nothing to me then: Osama bin Laden.

Before we left the United States, one of my friends who had been a Fulbright in a European country, told us there had been a rumor that some Fulbrights spied for the United States. I had hoped this wasn't true. However, before Jim Wilson drove us to Aleppo for the first time, another of the diplomats had said, "If there's anything you see that you think we should know, give us a call." I didn't see this as an invitation to spy. It seemed so innocuous, but I determined I was not in any sense a spy. I was an American Literature professor. I did not plan to report anything to anyone, especially by telephone.

One morning in Aleppo, Mel's friend, Mahmoud asked, "Did you hear about the explosion last night?"

"No."

"Someone planted a small bomb in a trash can beside the downtown post office."

"Did anyone get hurt?"

"No, but still the police are looking in to it."

I brushed this off. It didn't seem important to me. In a hurry to go to the university that day, I soon forgot all about the bomb. If there had been anything on the local TV news, we hadn't heard it, because we couldn't understand the Arabic. There probably had been no news about it at all. The Syrian government controlled all the news on TV and in the newspapers. The next month, when we were in Damascus, I happened to mention the bombing to the diplomats, and they didn't think it was significant either. But when we got home, I wondered if this might have been a test. Would the government's listener to our telephone conversations have reported me as a spy if I had phoned this to the embassy?

Although we were not spies, Mel and I were to find out that practically all the local people thought we were. The general public believed the only reason anyone from the United States or Europe came to Syria was to spy. People in Aleppo became convinced that the little compass Mel wore around his neck was really a device like Dick Tracy's radio watch for transmitting secret data. There may have been some truth in the belief that Westerners who came to Syria were spies. Though we thought it more likely that real spying was carried out by people less obviously foreign than Fulbrights and diplomats, still we had reason to believe that some American travelers also were spies. After our return to Iowa, we met Elwood Hanson, a tennis playing neighbor who had been a John Deere salesman in Syria and the Middle East. Before John Deere, he was in Army Intelligence. Mel speculated that Elwood had been a spy, but as usual, I was skeptical.

In Syria, we never felt completely safe, but we never felt any imminent danger either. Being American shielded us. For diplomatic reasons, the Syrian government didn't want anything to happen to an American. Sometimes we felt like the minor characters in a mystery novel. We knew what was happening in the first few chapters, but never found out where the twists and turns of the plot led. Who were the good guys? Who were the bad guys? How did the story turn out? We had been part of the story, but we never found out whether or how the problems were solved.

The University

Main Persons

Dr. Ibrahim, Chairman of the English Department,

Dr. Hannah, my office mate, who taught British Literature.

Dr. Constantine, an English professor, an exiled Egyptian

Dr. Hassan, a professor of Linguistics.

Dr. Rami, an English professor, author of a book in English about Arabian horses.

In Aleppo and Damascus, we made many new friends who took care of us, helped us settle in, showed us the country, told us stories, and provided interesting, if not always pleasant, adventures. I had come to Syria, however, to teach American Literature at the University of Aleppo. Now it is time to tell of the friends we made there and of our adventures with university faculty and students.

Even before we had found a place to live in Aleppo, I began to become acquainted with my colleagues in the English Department. I met the University Dean of Students on the day Jim Wilson brought us to Aleppo. A few weeks later, Mel and I took a taxi on our first unaccompanied visit to the campus. The cab came to a stop before imposing, locked, high iron gates. A young man, dressed in casual, civilian clothes, emerged from a sentry box, carrying a large Kalashnikov rifle. The driver, Mel and I had a conversation in hand signals, bits of Arabic and English, and then we were admitted and dropped in front of the Language and Literature building.

We found the Chair of the English Department, Dr. Ibrahim, in his first floor office. He welcomed us cordially. I remembered meeting him in Damascus at the party the American ambassador gave for the 50th anniversary of the Fulbright Program, where I had seen him and another man from the English department laughing and joking. I had been impressed with their joviality, taking this as a good sign.

Upon meeting him in Aleppo, Dr. Ibrahim began by informing me about the department. He said the English Department included both British Literature and American. "There's a lot more British, of course." This old refrain seemed quaint, recalling my undergraduate days at Morningside College, where students couldn't major in American Lit, because "there wasn't enough of it." The Dean of Students also had told me this on my first visit.

Dr. Ibrahim told me he was planning that I would teach a 3rd year and 4th year class in American Literature, if I agreed. I readily agreed. This is what I was expecting. Then he asked if I would teach a Master's class in their newly instituted graduate school. I was so grateful to the Fulbright Commission, I would gladly do it, although we both knew the Fulbright professors were obligated to teach only two classes each semester. I was happy to give the Syrian English Department more help than they were entitled to.

"I'll arrange your schedule, so you don't have to teach on Sundays. You know, of course, that Friday is our holy day, so we have no classes that day." I thanked him. Then, settling back in his chair, he said very solemnly, "You know you must not say anything against our government or our religion."

I was shocked. This is something I would never have heard in any American university. But I replied firmly, "I am not qualified to discuss either of those subjects. I have come here to teach American Literature." Then I assured him I would be ready to go when classes opened the following week.

"Oh, we don't usually begin for two more weeks."

He must have seen my surprise.

The students don't come, so the professors see no need to be here." He laughed heartily.

This was my introduction to "Syrian time." I remembered a colleague at Coe College who had complained when some international students had appeared two weeks into the term. I now understood what he felt then. I was used to American schools that operated on schedules and where appointments were kept on time. This I now saw was not universal. Not long after this meeting, Mel and I learned the term "Inshallah" at the small store we'd found that sold some English language newspapers from Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. We'd stopped on our usual Thursday for the one from Lebanon, and it wasn't there. When we asked about when it would come, the proprietor shrugged and said, "Inshallah," a word that means "God willing," or "maybe tomorrow" or, perhaps even more accurately, what Tennessee Ernie Ford used to say at the end of his TV show: "God willing and if the creek don't rise." We had to accustom ourselves to temporal irregularities.

Still, I expected better from my dentist. When I found one who spoke English, I made an appointment to get my teeth checked and cleaned. I arrived at her office about five minutes before my allotted time, but the door was locked. I rang the bell. Nobody answered it. I waited another ten minutes and rang the bell once more. Finally, the dentist's husband answered the door and showed me into her office. When the dentist appeared, she explained, "Nobody ever comes on time."

After our initial conversation, Dr. Ibrahim took me to my office, which I would share with Dr. Hannah. "I'll have a desk brought in for you," he said. "It's a good office. You have a window." He jerked aside the limp, gray curtain. With a ripping sound the fabric parted, and a small cloud of dust drifted through the incoming light. "No matter," he said. "I'll see that they're replaced." I didn't know then that having a window was unusual — most of the professors had small, windowless offices opposite the main hallway.

He gave me the lists of the necessary texts for the 3rd and 4th year classes. "You can choose your own texts for the graduate class," he added, and pointed out the way to the bookstore. I decided to pick up the texts for my classes. I needed the required books to include page numbers of my assignments and so we could examine passages together in class. In the book store, I was surprised I had to pay for my own text books. I was even more surprised when I examined the books to discover Syria did not belong to the International Copyright Union. The class texts had been printed by a knock-off press in Lebanon. Finding a home in Aleppo had been inordinately difficult; finding a book was internationally illegal.

As I later prepared my literature classes, I became acquainted with the English Department library. Unfortunately, most of the books in English were old anthologies left by former Fulbright professors. There were just two volumes of literary criticism of American literature, and these were both almost twenty years old. Because of the weight restrictions on international flights, I had brought only a few books. I felt that my resources would be quite limited. In exploring the library, I was helped by the librarian, Zainab, a single woman, who was kind and as helpful as she could be. Dr. Hannah told me she thought Zainab was quite poor, although she took in her brother from Damascus when he lost his job. Arab society expected one to help relatives at any cost.

The English library at the ICARDA School had a good selection, but aimed at elementary school children. Finding reading useful to my course preparations and for advanced student research would be a struggle. Mel and I missed having a good library and easy access to current papers and magazines.

When I next returned my office, I found a new desk and chair, and I met Dr. Hannah. She greeted me warmly and asked if I would like tea. When I specified "no sugar," she was surprised. She phoned for "tea, *la sucre* (no sugar)" and soon a small man, obviously the porter, arrived with our tea. He questioned me as he set down the cup, "*la sucre*?" I discovered I was the only person in Syria who drank tea without sugar. I also found out my poor undergraduate French would be of some use.

Dr. Hannah spoke excellent English. She had a picture of her three children on her desk, two little girls and a small boy. She told me she taught English Literature, and that she, like all the faculty except the foreigners, had her degree from a British university. Later I found out the government awarded scholarships to their best students to get graduate degrees in Great Britain, because at that time Syria was just beginning to develop a graduate degree program. She was pleasant and friendly, and I liked her immediately. She told me that when I had my syllabus finished, I could take it to the university printing shop and they would print copies for me. I couldn't print my own on my own computer because there was only one computer for the whole department. The internet was illegal in Syria, so the computer was of limited use anyway. And even though there was a printer, faculty were not allowed to use it for printing on university paper. I would have to use a typewriter and have my materials duplicated. Even in 1996, that seemed primitive. At home, I had just recently escaped typing mimeograph masters to printing from my computer. In Syria, my work would be harder and more time-consuming than I had anticipated.

After I met Dr. Hannah, Dr. Constantine, who had a tiny office at the end of our hall, came by to introduce himself. He was a slight, gray-haired man, obviously past middle age, and very courtly, an Egyptian Christian, the only other foreigner in the department. Dr. Hannah told me later that he had his doctorate from Trinity College in Dublin. She said there was a mystery about why he was teaching here and not in his home country. It was said that when Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser was assassinated in Cairo in 1970, Dr. Constantine had to flee. No one had any explanation about Dr. Constantine's political associations or activities. They knew only that he now lived in exile, though his family remained in Egypt.

Dr. Hassan, professor of linguistics, also introduced himself. These two and Dr. Hannah became my good friends. One other faculty member also became a friend; Dr. Rami was an expert on Arabian horses, having written a book about them in English for American readers.

The English Department had thirty-two professors, and Dr. Hannah was the only woman. Now, for a while, there would be two. "I'm glad to have you here," she told me.

Surprises

True to Dr. Ibrahim's predictions, the students did not arrive and classes did not begin on the official opening day. Once classes started, I began to "enjoy" other surprises.

While we settling in after Ab and his family left, I was getting used to my office. After using a computer at home, it was harder than I expected to use a typewriter again to prepare my syllabus for printing. Just developing an assignment schedule was difficult because the Chair of the Department had given me no dates for holidays, exams, etc. And there were no class lists, so I did not know how many students to prepare for. I would not have been able to read or pronounce their names, but I could at least count.

I was surprised to discover my classes for juniors and seniors would be taught in large lecture halls. Between one and two hundred came every day, although there was room for at least four hundred. I never could know exactly how many were present because I never had a class list. They segregated themselves, the men students sitting in one section, the women in another. There were also several women who wore not only the abayah (the long black cloak), and the hijab (a covering for the hair and neck), but also, for the most religious, a face veil, exposing only the eyes. These completely covered women sat in the last rows at the rear of the classroom. When the class began, they were required to throw back the face veil so the professor could see whether or not they were understanding. It was important to these veiled women that no man saw their faces, but they had to make this exception. I don't know how this was justified. Were the male professors not men? I wondered whether these traditional women were taking my classes to protect their modesty.

I was again surprised when I first tried to write on the green board at the front. Not only was the board aged and very worn, but there was only a scrap of chalk in the gutter. At home, the cleaning staff saw that each classroom was supplied with ample chalk. When I asked Hannah about this, she told me the professors were expected to buy their own chalk. I could get it in the university store.

I was teaching the standard American literature texts, books I knew well and loved, many from the 19th Century. These writers often refer to the Bible, usually the Old Testament, and because most of my students were not Christian or Jewish, I often thought it necessary to explain the references and, sometimes, to present the relevant passages from the Bible. Since I had been warned about the prohibition on criticizing Islam, I was extra careful. After one class in which I had explained a Biblical reference, an agitated student approached me and complained. I explained I was not asking students to become believers in another religion, but providing the context they would need to fully understand the author's meaning. He didn't seem satisfied, but neither he nor any other student complained again about my explanations.

Most surprising of all, and very dismaying too, was the result of my attempts to engage students in discussion. I believe that we learn the most important things about literature in collaboration, by exchanging, revising and refining our questions and observations. In this process, students also learn communication skills. That's the way I had always taught my college and university courses. But when I threw out a question for someone or several students to answer, no one would respond. I didn't understand why my Syrian students remained silent when I posed questions I believed would engage their interest. The next time I saw the two Gregorians who were medical interns, I asked them about this. They were more like Americans than anyone else I knew in Syria. They told me when a student speaks and is incorrect or gives an incomplete answer, he loses face. No one wants to risk that. Then I realized that there would be no discussion, and I would have to reorganize my usual teaching plans. I would have to spend my evenings and free days preparing new lectures over the assignments. There was a lot of work ahead of me if I was going to fill those 50 minutes usefully without student participation. On the positive side, I was beginning to recognize some of my students' faces, and when I looked over the vast auditorium, I was gratified to see some looks of interest.

While I would be extremely careful in talking about religion, I was determined to be subversive on the topics of democracy and women's rights. This would be possible even using only the officially acceptable texts. I decided to present many direct quotations from the readings, exploring them thoroughly. For example, In Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself* I found these perfect lines:

> I speak the pass-word primeval. I give the sign of democracy,
> By God! I will accept nothing which all cannot have their counterpart of on the same terms.
> Through me, many long dumb voices,
> Voices of the interminable generations of prisoners and slaves,
> Voices of the diseas'd and despairing and of thieves and dwarfs ….

Whether the government approved or disapproved, this is what Whitman says of democracy, that it includes everybody: the deck-

hand, paving-man, the music conductor, the peddler — he gives long lists of who is included in his democracy — everybody, and women, too, the young sister, the one-year wife, the factory girl. Whitman includes the slaves, even criminals and people society demeans. He does not leave anybody out. I searched all the approved texts for similarly appropriate quotes. In Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, I found the place where he talks about the difficult position of women in a theocratic society, and throughout the American texts I found and pointed to many affirmations of democracy and equality. American literature spoke for me. Surely some of the students knew what I was doing. Perhaps some of the faculty knew, also. Whatever they suspected, they were not free to talk about those ideas so visible in our texts.

My graduate class was very small, only twelve students, but an excellent size to get to know the students. (Much later I found out some students who wanted to sign up for my class were counselled by the Chair, whom I thought was my friend, not to take my class, but to pursue one of the other Master's Degrees in the Department, Linguistics or British Literature.) These students all spoke English well. Everyone in the department was supposed to speak English at all times. But, while the faculty spoke English when they were teaching, afterwards when gathered around the faculty coffee table the language was Arabic. The students, too, often forgot, or didn't feel compelled, and almost always they spoke Arabic. Immersed most of the day in Arabic, I was relieved to return home in the evening and speak English with Mel.

From the graduate students I learned a great deal about the courses they had taken before mine. I was surprised again that they knew virtually no American history: nothing about the settlement of the New World and the United States — how the early settlers found the United States' Eastern seaboard a vast and dark forest populated with ferocious wild animals and often unfriendly native tribes. None of my students had grasped the enormous expanse of the North American continent or of the Westward movement of European settlers. None of the students seemed able to find Iowa on a map. Of course, given my own ignorance of Syria, I could hardly hold this against them.

From time to time a small group of men would come into my office with questions. Later I found out these were mainly members of the Student Baath Party, President al-Assad's political party that controlled the country. They wanted to know where I was from. I found out they had a general idea of where New York, Los Angles, Chicago, and Washington, D.C, were. To explain Cedar Rapids, Iowa, I said it was about 400 miles west of Chicago. This they could imagine.

Students asked other questions, some that surprised me. They were surprised to learn I was in my sixties and still working. Eagerly I explained that I loved teaching; students who were trying to learn and to understand their world were interesting and inspiring to me. Several then shook their heads, probably in disapproval. In Syria, I was an anomaly. Sixty was old, and very few women worked outside their homes. Old women were to live with their families and help keep house. I almost daily passed an example of what those men expected: the woman about my age who sat on the stoop on one of the houses on my way to the market. She was invariably preparing vegetables, snapping beans or hollowing out squash for stuffing.

There was a student who came regularly to my office, sat down opposite me and told a fairy story. Syria is full of storytellers, and I was pretty sure he was telling tales handed down through his village's storyteller. I was interested in the ones that hadn't been collected. I asked him to write them down for me, but he never did. He also told me about his village, apparently a perfect place. The women there were so happy. His mother and the village women would work together to prepare their vegetables for the evening meal or to dry them on the flat roofs of their houses. He repeatedly invited me to visit his village, but he never suggested a date. I confess I had little interest in getting to know him and his village better, but I wondered what the women would tell me if they could speak freely. I found him too friendly though. He was too smooth a talker.

He told me he also worked in a summer program for United States high school students called Summer in Syria. He admired these students greatly and hoped to marry one of the girls. Already graying, he was unusual among Syrian men. His complexion was a pasty gray; he was gangly and quite uncoordinated. He flopped and shuffled, he coughed and snuffled. He could have been a caricature illustration in a Charles Dickens novel — *Uriah Heap*.

He was an example of another surprising discovery, that some of my students weren't the traditional student age. Some were in their middle twenties, thirties, or even older. Dr. Hannah explained that students who failed a class could take it again and then sit for its exam again for as many as nine years until he/she passed. Some students remained the full nine years, perhaps on purpose. This gave a male student a way to avoid army requirements until he had received his degree, and it gave a young woman an excuse to put off an arranged marriage, if she really didn't want it.

One woman came to my office on the first day of classes to apologize because she couldn't attend the classes.

"Why not?" I asked.

"My mother-in-law forbids it; she'll let me get the books, and I may take the final exam."

"Why is this necessary?"

"My husband and I live with her. She's traditional."

This adult woman's plight seemed incomprehensible. "Can't you live someplace else?"

She shook her head sadly. "We have to live with her. The mother-in-law is always the boss."

I felt sorry for her; she was doing her best with a hard situation. I hoped that her mother-in-law was otherwise kind to her. But probably she was not.

Being a successful student is a time-consuming, cumulative process. It requires long-term commitment and persistence. At the University of Aleppo I met many wonderful students. I was surprised at the methods they used to pass tests and their reluctance to discuss the texts. I learned of these problems early, and they presented puzzles for me to solve. How would I encourage their original thinking? How would I help them develop the confidence to voice their opinions? I had my work cut out for me.

Teaching in Aleppo proved to be hard work. Unexpectedly I had to change my teaching methods and write new lectures for every class period. Many students, also, found American literature and my approach to teaching puzzling. I learned that in the university curriculum, American Literature was typically presented from a Marxist perspective. Though the Soviet Union was gone, still at that time Russia was pouring large sums of money into the Syrian economy. Russian cultural influence still included viewing the U.S. through a Marxist lens, and the Baath Party approved this critical approach. From the Baath point of view, it was a good thing to encourage literary criticism that denigrated United States' culture. Although I was aware of Marxist criticism, I was approaching teaching American literature in a way I thought more likely to interest my students and help them gain insight into American culture. For example, I approached the plays I used as family dramas, presenting the difficulties within families. In this way, I felt confident that we were working together to find mutual connections between our cultures.

Teaching Challenges

The first exams I gave became a problem for me as well as for the students. The chair explained the numerical grading scale, and then he told me that if an inordinate number of students failed or passed, the faculty would "adjust" the grades! I was shocked. He explained that the faculty expected about half of the students would fail. I learned later about the 9 year limit for completing a degree, but still this practice seemed very strange.

I found out later that the chair failed to tell me several important things about grading, especially the details about how to mark the exams as I read them. After the first semester, a grim-faced harridan from the exam department brought my stack of finished exams, slammed them down on my desk and began to scold me in loud Arabic. Perhaps fortunately, I had no idea what she was saying, but she seemed to enjoy herself. When Dr. Hannah appeared, I asked her.

"Didn't Dr. Ibrahim tell you about placing red check marks on each page?" she asked. "And you have to put the number of points for each question after that answer, and the final score for each question and the total then goes on the front cover."

When I considered all the extra work this would mean, I silently aimed a jinn down the hall toward the chairman's office, willing to suspend belief long enough for the curse to arrive.

Dr. Hannah took pity on me. As she had some time, she would go through some of my exams and put the checks on each page. I was very grateful, but it turned out to have a negative side, too. Some of the students saw her marking the exams from my class, and this started the rumor that she had graded my exams. This alarmed them because she was known as a hard grader, and they had hoped I would be more lenient.

In 1996, the graduate program was new, and I was teaching in American Literature, one of the three majors possible. Twelve students registered for my class, ten women and two men. One man came only a few times, so I never got to know him. The other man suggested the three-hour class might take a break for tea at midpoint. There was a tiny alcove where the janitors kept a little tea stand. Our first day there, this student spoke to the janitor in Arabic, asking him to wash the little glass for me, because I was an American.

This young man was a good student, and since all the graduate students spoke excellent English, we could have good deep discussions about the literature they read. Another student was a woman in her twenties who taught American literature at her high school. She thought carefully

about the texts. I urged her to go to the meeting wherein the American diplomats were going to select the Syrian students who would be invited to study in the United States. I thought she had a good chance.

"I can't come on the thirtieth," she said.

"It's important. That's the only day the American diplomats will be in Aleppo."

"I have family obligations."

"Skip just one family gathering for this important meeting. I think you have a good chance."

"I just can't. My grandfather is coming home from the *Hajj*."

I had seen and heard the ways family members greeted Hajjis when they returned. The packed buses coming back from Mecca were met by flocks of family, and often with a small band, or at least, a tuba player. When they saw the bus coming down the road, the cheering and celebration began. Many of the old men in the bus had saved all their lives to have enough to finally go on the *Hajj.* This was the most important thing a person could ever do. I could see it was impossible for her to skip it. I was sorry for her, but I was glad she was in the class, and I determined to help her all I could — for her sake, for the sake of her high school students, and for the sake of American literature.

Another young woman in the class was obligated to wear a long, heavy *abayah* and a *hijab* every day, no matter how hot the weather. One hot day I asked her if she was uncomfortable.

"Yes. When I walk home on a day like this, by the time I get there, I'm dripping with sweat."

I sighed, sorry for all the women in heavy *abayahs* in Syria's hot weather.

"My family is traditional," she went on. "My father and brothers expect me to wear all of it."

She was ambitious for an independent life, but women like her were caught. Even if they earned an education, there were almost no jobs for them unless they would teach. Many would leave the country if they could take their families with them.

"My mother tries to help me," she said.

Not all mothers were supportive of daughters who wanted more than the traditional role of wife and mother. I hoped she and her mother would be strong enough.

A pair of intelligent and articulate twins in the class, came over to my flat in the late afternoons the next year for consultations on their Master's theses. Both were eager to talk about their work, and they also were fun-loving and beautiful. One was writing an insightful thesis on the novels of Ernest Hemingway. I thought her thesis was excellent, quite original, and her writing was good. But the English Department Chairman, Dr. Ibrahim, had his own, different ideas about Hemingway, and he insisted on changes. Because he was the Department Chair and the advisor for all the graduate students in English, she made the changes.

There was a great deal I didn't know about most of my students, such as their backgrounds and their reasons for studying at the university. And it was a long time before I became aware that there were informers in every class, reporting to the Baath Party. Fortunately, I had been diligent about following the rules and admonitions I'd received at the beginning. In the graduate class it was easy to spot the informer, almost certainly the only male student who attended regularly, the one who suggested taking tea breaks. In the other classes, I still don't know, though it was always a man. In Syria all good jobs go to men — members of the Baath Party. Mahmoud, Mel's friend who had been so helpful in getting us a TV, eventually told me at least one person in every family had to be a party member for the group. In his family it was his older brother, a medical student. Again much later, the Chair told me all the professors were required to be party members. He said he was not, but his wife was. She was an official of the party, and from this the whole family derived privileges. For instance, if your father (or mother) was a party member, your children, when applying for university admittance, could add ten points to their senior baccalaureate exam score; the highest scorers were admitted to the more prestigious departments. It turned out that Ab, our landlord, was a member, but he was barred from holding any high positions because he was a Palestinian.

I learned that the male students sometimes had a younger brother living with them. I didn't know why, but I saw that the older was very attentive to the younger. I wondered about these younger brothers, whether they were in school, how they fit into the family system. Mel became friends with one of my fourth-year students who was caring for his brother.

Osama said he was from an outlying village. His mother had sent a younger brother into town with some oranges from the new crop on their farm, and this brother was staying with him. Would we come out to his rental place and meet the boy and have a snack with them? Mel liked the young man, so we agreed. He showed us how to take a series of mini-buses to a nearby section of the city, and we met the little boy and the other students who were also staying in the house. While we were there, he played a tape of the Beach Boys, his favorite.

American popular music was widely admired in Syria, and it provided opportunities for socializing between sexes. The loudspeakers in front of the music stores blared mostly American current hits. Young men crowded close to the

doors to listen. From time to time a bevy of girls would stroll past. They pretended to be casual. From my American point of view, I saw this pretense as the natural product of the arranged marriage restrictions.

Parties

The diplomats from Damascus asked me to give a party when they were in Aleppo and to invite the English faculty. The evening of the party, only two faculty came, my office-mate, Dr. Hannah with her husband, and the chairman, Dr. Ibrahim and his wife. Later I learned that this would be part of a pattern. Dr. Ibrahim had told the faculty that they couldn't come. Presumably, he was acting on the Baath Party's desire to minimize my foreign influence. The party controlled everything, including faculty jobs and salaries. The faculty had to obey the chairman.

We later found that the other faculty who had become our good friends would accept our invitations only once in a while. Dr. Constantine, a more daring colleague, told me about the piles of reports they all had to write on any foreigner on the faculty (and I suspected each other as well). The Syrian security agencies that were watching Mel and me were undoubtedly writing reports about who visited us and who our friends were. It probably was dangerous to be our friends.

Though just two faculty attended our party, a large number of English students came, and I had invited other new young friends. As our flat was ideal for parties, I wondered whether Ab ever had students over for his parties.

The diplomats said they would reimburse me for the refreshments if I would save the receipts, but in Syria, shop owners rarely had cash registers. Their cash registers were their pockets, no printed evidence. I was glad to pay for the party, but eventually the diplomats figured out how to raid their petty cash to reimburse me.

After these parties, I always remembered my garage family neighbors, taking them the leftovers.

The Rifle

Every work day, when entering the university, I passed through the main gate on University Avenue, which was guarded by a kid with a big gun. I didn't know anything about guns. Mel, who had grown up hunting and who had been in the Army for two years, was familiar with them. The wrought-iron University Gate was enormous. An armed guard would unlock it only for professors' cars. There were two smaller gates on either side for pedestrians. On rainy days, when I could catch a cab, the driver had to stop outside and I had to put my head out the window so the guards could recognize me, before unlocking the gate and waving us in. One evening I came home with an exciting gate adventure to report to Mel and Mahmoud, who was visiting.

"This is my adventure for the day; I was nearly at the exit gate this evening when suddenly a cab turned off University Avenue as if to barrel in. He slammed on his brakes just inches from the locked gate. The kid, who was on guard duty, ran out of his kiosk, pointing his gun."

Mel nodded.

"It was a long gun, some kind of a rifle, I think."

Mahmoud explained. "The guards carry Kalashnikovs. It's part of the Russian influence still left."

"It was unusual and looked interesting, so I just stood there and watched."

"You stood right in the middle of that walkway?" Mel was shocked.

"Yes, I wanted to see everything. Then the guard did something to the gun and a great big bullet fell out — it looked like copper, and it must have been big enough to kill an elephant. I wanted to see better, so I walked over to the other side."

Mel exploded, "Good God, Why would you do that?"

"I thought of George Orwell's story, 'Shooting an Elephant.' The kid had ejected that giant bullet. It was just laying there in the street. I thought it was all right."

"That was the most dangerous time! He was just checking to be sure the next bullets were in the chamber."

"I didn't know."

"You're lucky you didn't get shot," Mel said. "You might have walked right into his line of fire, so you could see better. Now you know for next time."

I was thoroughly scolded, but I hadn't finished the story.

"Suddenly, like magic a whole clutch of young men appeared. They jerked the driver out of the car and hustled him away. Remember, we had seen men seem to appear from nowhere before, like jinns, on the camping trip and after the accident on Nile Street? The Greeks were right to say that even the stones can morph into men. Then I came home. But what do you suppose happened to that driver?"

"I've told you about curiosity," Mel admonished, still upset at my ignorance of firearms.

"I'll ask Dr. Hannah tomorrow. You know there probably won't be anything about it on the news."

The next day I asked Dr. Hannah, who confirmed my guess that there was nothing about it on the news. When I asked her what happened to the driver, she shrugged, "They took him to the jail; they probably knocked out a few teeth."

I was still puzzled. Though I knew Muslims were not supposed to drink alcoholic beverages, I thought the taxi driver must have been drunk. I decided to ask Dr. Constantine about him. I believed he was well-informed. I'm sure he could hear everything Dr. Hannah and I said to each other. He must have heard everything that was said in the nearby Chairman's office, too. Like me, he was a foreigner and a Christian. He told me his Egyptian family believed that in the past they must have had money because they were allowed to pay the tax Christians had to pay to keep their religion after the Muslim conquest of most of the Middle East. I was sure Dr. Ibrahim had warned him, also, about not displaying Christian symbols, but I had spotted a small copy of painter Warner Sallman's familiar portrait, "Head of Christ," tucked inconspicuously into his pencil cup.

"Dr. Constantine," I asked, "what happened to the taxi driver who tried to crash the university gates?"

"We'll never know," he said slowly and carefully. "It's better not to ask."

There were many things for a foreigner to learn about living in Syria. When to keep silent was one, because there were some things no one could talk about. When and where to stay out of the line of fire was another. Perhaps both were equally dangerous.

The Student Baath Party Requisitions my Classroom and Other Troubles

In part because I believed that education was the main key to a better world and a better life for everyone, I loved teaching, whether at home at Coe College or in Syria. So, I was protective of my teaching time and space. Therefore, events at the University of Aleppo sometimes puzzled and shocked me.

One afternoon, early in the first semester, as I was beginning class in my usual auditorium, a group of students burst in, their leaders shouting at me loudly. Flabbergasted, I asked one of my students what they were saying.

"They are saying that we have to get out — leave this auditorium. They are having a meeting here of the Student Baath Party."

"Don't they know we have class in here every Tuesday and Thursday at this time?"

"They say to get out."

I was incensed, but I knew I must appear reasonable even in an unreasonable situation. I did not feel reasonable, but I reminded myself that long ago I had studied acting in New York.

I said, "Education is important. I plan to have class. Tell them I am going to the Dean of Languages to see where our class will meet." Followed by some of the students, I marched down to the Dean's office. I knew this interference was part of the government policy to welcome the services of American professors, but also to embarrass them when they could.

I laid my case before the Dean, and he smiled kindly and said, "We must let the students have their meeting."

I was persistent with the Dean, "What other room can you give us?"

"I have a small room in the sub-basement," he said, "But it's scarcely adequate."

It was obvious that the Dean had to defer to the Student Baath Party. Were the inmates running the asylum?

"I'll take it," I said, and he sent a janitor to lead me to a small room where the flooring was missing in places. It had a lectern, but I noticed underneath it, a small open box of blue sticks that I recognized as rat poison.

When we reassembled I noted that not everybody had followed us to this little pokey-hole. Nevertheless, I persisted. I was going to hold class. I opened my lecture notes and began where I left off.

I was not used to student political groups affiliated with government and having so much power. At Coe College I was aware of small student groups organizing and participating in national election campaigns. They tended to become less active after each election. At the University of Aleppo there seemed to be just one student organization. There was no student government that I could discern, and there were no extra-curricular groups: no choir, no band or orchestra, no chess club, no debate club, no student drama group.

That afternoon I did not linger in the classroom after my lecture. I was very much aware the rat poison must be there for a reason. I looked forward to my walk home in the pleasant fall weather, and I hoped Mel had decided we would have rotisserie chicken that night and had ridden his bicycle over to our usual street-corner vendor in the market place. Its usual accompaniments were a big tomato, a generous helping of French fries, and a hot pepper, which Mel always declined.

It would be such a relief to sit down to a good meal, like one we might have at home, and speak English with steady, dependable Mel. Struggling with Syrian customs was tiring, especially trying to figure out the place and power of the Student Baath Party and everyone else.

When I mentioned this incident to Dr. Hannah, she said, "The Student Baath Party has a lot of power here. They are the ones who set the exam schedule!" The students set the exam schedule! It seemed to be true that the students were running the asylum.

I asked Mahmoud, our student friend, "Why did they want my auditorium today?"

"Tomorrow is their election for a President. Jihad, the guy who has been President for six years will say to the members: 'You stupid donkeys on the left side of the room, nominate Musa. You stupid donkeys on the right side, nominate me again. Then Musa will get up and give a speech. Then I will give a speech. After the speeches, you, Omar, get up and say, that Jihad gave such a great speech that I move we elect him again unanimously. Now don't forget what side of the room you're on.'"

Mel and I laughed. "What if there is a mistake, and someone gets elected who shouldn't?" I asked.

Mahmoud laughed. "It has happened."

The method of choosing the winner before the election had a history in Syria. One of our local friends, a young doctor, told us the current political joke was that an aid came to President Hafiz al-Assad, who had been in power since 1970, and said, "Congratulations, you have just been elected by a vast majority. Everyone in Syria voted for you except one man."

Al-Assad snarled, "Get me his name!"

The rude and abrupt interruption of my class with no prior notice disturbed me, but there were other aspects of university life that I found problematic, as well.

One of the perpetual interruptions was the mid-morning call to prayer, broadcast over the near-by mosque's amplifiers during my morning class. Always some students got up and left when they heard it. I could not forbid their leaving and officially could only assume they were going out to pray, I noticed a couple (I learned later that they were engaged) who were faithful adherents to the prayer call and always went out together.

Attendance at the lectures seemed irregular to me. Without a class list, I had no idea who or how many should be in attendance. The large room would hold several hundred, and I guessed my attendance varied from as low as 100 to as high as 300.

I failed to teach my students to try living by my American time instead of their Syrian time. Some students were always late to my afternoon class. There was one group that regularly disturbed the class when they came in late. I gave a talk about the importance of being present for the entire session, including the introduction to the day's assignment. I explained that missing the introduction meant they lost information that made the rest of my presentation understandable, and that the interruptions wasted time and made it harder for the other students. This had no effect.

My first remedy had been to repeat the introduction, but that took away valuable minutes from the class time. Next I decided to lock the door when class was scheduled to begin. I underestimated the students' boldness. The first day I locked the door, they rattled it and this disturbed the class, probably as much as when they came in late. Over several more days of lock-out, their talking and rattling the door only became louder and more insistent. Unreconciled, I nevertheless gave in to Syrian time.

I found other teaching problems, as well. After the first semester tests, in my second year, I was visited by a delegation of students. One girl demanded that I explain why she failed the exam. Because all the exams are written anonymously, with only a number identifying them, I had no idea who wrote any specific exam. I pulled out my copy of the exam and asked her to tell me how she answered the first question. She had obviously memorized an answer, but it did not fit my question. I began to suspect that she had studied an old exam from some other professor of American Literature. I learned from Dr. Hannah that, in fact, previous exam questions circulated among the students, so they had some idea what questions might appear on their test. A student would compose a paragraph of his or her own, memorize it, and hope the question would again be asked on the exam. That can work, but there must be many cases when it does not, and one can easily imagine students trying to make the prepared answers somehow fit the questions they get.

I gradually came to understand better how difficult writing exams was for my students. All the English exams were written in the classroom, in English, in traditional Blue Books, with blue covers and 20 lined pages. Students found it difficult to write quickly in English because Arabic is written from right to left. English spelling is remarkably difficult, even for native speakers, even more so for foreigners. And students told me that their professors counted off a great deal for spelling mistakes. Writing answers spontaneously in English under these conditions produced considerable anxiety. It was not surprising, therefore, that their main way of coping was by memorizing answers they hoped would work on the exams.

From time to time a student I did not know would come to my office and ask for help. Often these were first year students who were taking the required composition class. One would hand me a short paragraph and would say, "Will this do?"

"Do for what?"

"For the exam."

When I asked my office visitors why they didn't ask their composition professor to look at their paragraphs, they told me he wouldn't answer any student questions. Their composition class consisted primarily of reading good writing, and professors rarely read any student writing. When they did, the Syrian faculty mainly complained

about mechanical aspects of the student's papers — lack of proper spelling or punctuation. This frustrated me. I much preferred teaching college writers to work with interesting ideas, and to develop supporting examples, logical transitions, relevant research and satisfactory endings. Students they told me that the professors actually refused to read any of the students' writing until the final exam. This seemed appalling to me until I found out the composition classes often had 400 or more students in them. Now I saw the cause of the complaints from the professors of the 3rd and 4th year students. There was no way a professor could read regularly the weekly papers from a class of four hundred.

I felt for my students. Third year students were graded for the semester on the mid-term and the final exams. The fourth-year students had to write a paper and the final essay exam. They received so little supervised practice, had so few ways to show their competency, and yet a great deal hung on their exam grades.

Other students came, some that I began to suspect had been sent by the Baath Party to catch me criticizing their religion or their government, or even using some words that were immoral. One of their ploys was to send a student I didn't know with a list of words — one student came in with a list of women's undergarments. I sent him away. Another group was headed by a boy with mischievous brown eyes that fairly snapped as he tried to trap me. I laughed because he reminded me of a seventh-grade boy I had known in Maryland on my first teaching job. "Excuse us from class to attend an important Party meeting at the Main Post Office downtown."

I told them how much I admired young people who loved their country and wanted to participate in its politics, but class would go on, education was important, and important to a nation, so I could not excuse them. This discussion went back and forth for quite a while, and I began laughing quietly. My seventh-grade look-alike adversary laughed quietly, too, enjoying the exchange, and knowing he wasn't going to win. "Of course, you can go without being excused," I told him, "For me, education should come first."

One day near the end of the semester a man came to my office and told me he needed only the credit from this American Literature class to graduate, and his job depended on his receiving this degree.

I offered ways he could study for the exam: re-read all the texts, looking up the words he didn't know, then writing a summary of the book to fix its ideas in his mind, and if possible, finding other students who were going to take the test to study with. I wished him luck.

Mahmoud told us some professors sold grades. The news had spread how five professors in the medical faculty at Tishreen University had been fired for selling grades. A Fulbright's wife, who was a local woman, failed a test at the University of Damascus, but her professor phoned her father and hinted that for a certain sum, she would pass. I didn't think any of the professors in the University of Aleppo's English Department sold grades, because unlike medicine and the other professional departments, an English degree wasn't worth very much. Mahmoud said you could tell who sold grades — the professors who had cars. Our landlord, Professor Nassar, owned a car.

Major elements of education at the University of Aleppo appalled me, but still, the Syrian students were like my students at Coe College, some of them dedicated, some marking time. It was important to me to set the table and to invite them all to the feast of American literature. It might even be possible to interest some of the members of the Student Baath Party. Could I dare to hope that they might be influenced?

Dirty Toilets

The faculty women's toilet in my building at the university included a Western stool, but the public restroom was closer. Soon after the start of the first semester, I decided the closer one was good enough, but when I entered I was stopped by a group of women. "You should not go there."

"Why not?"

"It's so dirty," they said, wrinkling their noses.

Indeed, it was dirty. The metal containers in the middle of the room for the used toilet paper were overflowing. (At that time Syria's sewer system was not equipped to handle toilet paper.) Most of the doors to the individual stalls were broken or missing; the lavatories along one wall were below a series of drips of unknown origin from the ceiling. The women said it was always like this.

"Why don't you ask the chairman to have it fixed?"

"We have, but he only shouts at us."

I had heard Dr. Ibrahim's shouting -- from his office down the hall from me at both colleagues and students.

Dr. Hannah told me the National Legislature granted Department heads discretionary sum to run their departments. He had the power to improve the toilets, but the women believed he would not do this for them.

"What if a number of you go into his office all together?"

"We've tried that, too. But all the girls are scared, and so are we."

"If you got up a petition," I suggested, "would a lot of women sign? Maybe he wouldn't ignore that."

They laughed. "Who could write it?"

They looked at me.

"I can't write in Arabic," I told them. "One of you has to write it." I recognized among them several from my classes. One had even been brave enough to ask me questions after class several times. After a few minutes of exchanging looks, one of those I recognized agreed to do it.

Another explained, "Her father is an officer in the Baath Party." In those first days, I had not yet learned about the extensive powers of the Baath Party or about the influence of the Student Baath Party at the university.

"Can we leave it in your office?' she asked. "I'll come and get it and bring it to class."

Somewhat naively, I was thinking like an American. The women seemed exhilarated by the possibility of being heard. In their society where men were in charge of almost everything, determining whether their daughters wore the *hijab* and the *abayah*, whether or not they could go to college or stay home, and, in many cases, whom they would marry, the chance to have their voices heard gave them hope. We decided to keep the petition in my office on a bookstand beside the door, so women who weren't in my classes could come in to sign it.

I thought it only fair I should let Dr. Ibrahim know the women were making "a little petition." When I stopped in his office, I didn't mention its subject. When I returned across the hall to our office, I told Dr. Hannah about the petition. She said she heard me tell Dr. Ibrahim, but she had already heard about it. I was surprised how such news sped through the university. I probably should have realized then that I had stepped on a hornet nest.

A few days later, I noticed the petition had a number of signatures, but I thought if I asked the women to stay after class was finished, some of the others who had, perhaps, not heard of it, would also sign. When class was over, I asked the women to please stay a few minutes. Instantly, the men students besieged me, asking what I wanted to say to the girls. I wouldn't tell them, and I shut the door after the last one left. Then I said, "Some of the women have made a petition for a clean toilet room, and you can also sign, if you want to." The woman who wrote the petition unrolled it and held a pen at the ready. I then left and went to my office.

I was sitting at my desk, re-reading *The Scarlet Letter* when a group of sobbing women suddenly appeared at the door. They were from the class I had just left.

"He tore up our petition," they sobbed.

I stood up and demanded. 'Who? What happened?"

"Jihad, President of the Student Baath Party."

"No," I said very loudly, "he can't do that."

"He did. He called us bad girls."

"He called us worse" said another.

"The snake!" I exploded.

The girls laughed. I had named him accurately, and because he already had a reputation as a sycophant, the name fit him perfectly, and as it turned out what had been named, could not be unnamed.

"What can be done?" I asked.

The crying quieted somewhat now. "Nothing."

The girls were despondent. They understood the power of the Baath Party as I did not at that time. They were afraid, but in my innocence, I was not. I was an American! I was going to do something about this outrage. How could the Baath Party be concerned about girls wanting a clean bathroom at a university? It seemed like such a normal request, and so minor in the great scope of government or even university concerns.

When I arrived the next morning, Dr. Ibrahim called me into his office. "What's this about you getting the girls to start a petition?" he began.

"Dr. Ibrahim, the women wrote the petition. It's not my petition. They told me they wanted a clean toilet room. They said when a few of them came to you, you dismissed them. So they told me they would start the petition, and I came here in and told you about it." As I reminded him of this, I was as humble and diplomatic as I could be.

"No, yesterday was the first I ever heard about it."

I struggled not to snarl when I gently suggested, "You must have forgotten?" And I added, "They told me that a male student tore up their petition. How could a student do that?"

After he was silent for a moment, I went on. "The citizens of Syria have the right to petition."

I didn't know anything about Syrian law, but I took a wild guess, knowing that the government carefully preserved the appearances of democracy. President, al-Assad, was elected, although only his name appeared on the ballot. There was a Legislature, and unlike many Muslim nations, women could be delegates, and some were elected to it.

"How many had signed?" he asked.

"Two hundred, but the women told me they could get a lot more. They're thinking at least a thousand. They were just beginning."

He swiveled his office chair, facing the window, his back toward me. He groaned, "Two hundred dissidents." When he turned back he said, "This is very serious, Dr. Struthers. I will think about this." Then he dismissed me.

As I left his office, I remembered again the Emily Dickinson poem I had been thinking about when I left Iowa:

And made as he would eat me up
As wholly as a Dew
Upon a Dandelion's Sleeve –
And then – I started – too –

The next morning when I arrived at the office, Dr. Hannah greeted me. "They're talking about you at the President's office."

"The President of the University?" I asked, incredulous.

"Yes, Dr. Hannah said.

"Is it about the women's petition? It's such a minor thing."

But I sensed in Dr. Hannah's voice and demeanor that this wasn't minor. Mahmoud, Mel's student friend, had told us about an American engineering professor who had been dismissed by the university because the Student Baath Party thought he graded them too hard, and about another American, a woman, who had accepted a gold bracelet from a student. She had been sent home, too. I reviewed carefully all my interactions with students and everyone since I arrived. I had been extraordinarily careful to do nothing that could be misinterpreted socially or academically. If the President and "they," whoever they were, talked about me, this meant that they were considering whether they now could find some reason to send me home in disgrace.

"I am not going to allow any cloud to be cast over me or my academic record," I said carefully to Dr. Hannah. "I have done nothing wrong. I told Dr. Ibrahim the women were starting a petition."

"I overheard you tell him," she agreed. She was on my side. I breathed easier. But I'd naively stepped into Dickinson's sea. Or in my own metaphor, I had stirred up the hornets.

I explained to Dr. Hannah, "I have always relied on my background, my academic performance and accomplishments," I said, "and I cannot allow them to be questioned. I don't like to rely on my connections, but I will if it is necessary." In Syria, connections were paramount, as I had already learned, and, fortunately, I had some. Amir and Miriam had told me if I ever had any trouble, I was to contact their relatives. I knew my students had an aunt who was the Syrian ambassador to a European country, and a friend who was the current Minister of Education in the Syrian cabinet. Certainly they could help. And there was the General.

I said to Dr. Hannah, "You remember several Sundays ago I went to Tartus to visit the General?" Everyone in Syria knew that almost every general in Syria was an Alawite, President al-Assad's tribe, and that Tartus and the far Eastern region was Alawite country. "If the petition for clean toilets causes me to call on my friends for help," I said, "the highest authorities in the country will hear about it." From what I had heard about President al-Assad, I was confident he would be furious if he was bothered with this little problem involving toilets and an American.

Then I returned to my usual work.

Nothing happened for several days. Then Jihad (formerly Uriah Heap, now known as "the snake"), the President of the Student Baath Party, came into my office, sat down before my desk and began one of his fairy stories.

"Stop!" I said. "Why did you tear up the women's petition?"

'It was my duty. I had to do it. They are dirty girls."

"They are not dirty girls. They're good women. And it was terrible for you to take their petition and destroy it."

"It was my duty. They set fire to the toilet room."

It was true that some time ago, someone had thrown a still burning cigarette in one of the overflowing barrels.

"Still, it was wrong to do it. And you cannot come to my office anymore."

He didn't move. "You have to leave," I said again. "Go away."

He looked at me as if no one had ever told him what to do. He was an officer in the Baath Party. He thought he was in charge.

"Leave," I said emphatically, pointing to the door. "Leave."

The snake slunk out, repeating under his breath: "Duty, it was my duty."

A few days later, Dr. Ibrahim again called me into his office. "Now, Dr. Struthers, this little thing about the petition,"

Now it was a "little thing." I breathed a sigh of relief. I knew I was in the right — still, what the Baath Party might do to me had been troubling.

"I think we can clear the waters," he continued. I had muddied no waters. To me all was clear, but I remained silent.

"You know that we in developing countries are sensitive to subjects like this."

"You studied in England. You know how Westerners value clean toilets for everyone, but especially for women."

"We are in Syria, and it's a delicate subject for us. But now I must ask you to promise me you will leave delicate subjects alone and stick to teaching literature." He was capitulating! I kept my face still, my satisfaction under control. Dr. Hannah had passed along my connections and helped me reach Dickinson's "solid town":

Until we met the solid town
No man he seemed to know;
And bowing with a mighty look
At me, the sea withdrew.

"If you will promise me you will see the toilet room is cleaned up, I will promise."

He gave me his word, and then added, "I must also ask that you cease calling Jihad 'the snake'." I readily agreed and never again used that appellation, though I don't believe my students followed my example. It was small of me, and I shouldn't have done that, although it fit him perfectly.

"Agreed," he said. We smiled at each other. Within a few weeks all the lavatories in the toilet had been replaced, and the leaking ceiling above them repaired. The girls were elated and became my partisans. We waited, but nothing else happened. I had failed to give Dr. Ibrahim a timed deadline for all the needed improvements. I saw that I had made a mistake. But I was a novice at using connections. Still, the toilets were much improved. Not all of my adventures in feminism turned out so well.

American Literature Students attempt to Produce a Play

I worked constantly to make American Literature come alive for students who knew so little about my nation. The required texts included *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller and *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams. When I reviewed previous test questions to help prepare my exams, I learned that Miller's play usually was taught as a Communist indictment of capitalism. The capitalist system was killing Willie Loman. To engage students, I had stressed family problems within the social milieu of the play.

At the beginning of my second year, the 1997 September semester, all the students in my 4th year classes came from my 3rd year classes. I could recognize more faces. They remained reluctant to discuss the works we read, but there was one remarkable exception, when we read Arthur Miller's play, *The Death of a Salesman*. There is a scene in which one of the salesman's sons, Biff, grabs and restrains his father. Several students openly expressed their shock. This was rude treatment of the all-powerful and all-wise father. I explained that Biff was attempting to prevent his father from committing suicide. But in their society, the father was so respected that physical opposition even for this reason would not have been possible. Many students kiss their father's hand every day when they come home. Two students at the ICARDA School confessed to Mel that their chauffeur had beaten them on their fathers' orders for watching porn on TV. Still, each kissed his father's hand every day. Fathers could not be wrong. My explanations changed no minds. I did not succeed in convincing my students that Biff was being loving and kind.

I wished I could show the students a film production to help make this clearer. While reading a play is valuable, performance brings a drama to life. One day a promising opportunity appeared.

Dr. Ibrahim called me into his office, "Would you be interested in helping the students produce an American one-act play?"

"Yes!" I was delighted.

I had been disappointed the university had no drama club, no clubs at all except the Student Baath Party. I had studied acting in New York one summer and had been active in drama in my undergraduate days and in the community theater when Mel and I moved to Cedar Rapids. I had also written a short play for the children's theater there. After returning from Syria, I studied playwriting with a Coe colleague and wrote several plays. Drama was close to my heart, and this would give the students a chance to know some interesting American characters more intimately and to practice their English.

"What play do you suggest?" I asked Dr. Ibrahim.

"We thought you would suggest one."

I protested. "I don't have any of the short drama texts with me" I said. "The internet is forbidden here in Syria, so I can't search there."

"Perhaps you can find something in our English library."

I sighed.

The English Language Library contained mostly British literature and almost no American. Nevertheless, I went to take a look. There I was helped by Mrs. Judith, the little woman who often assisted me. She showed me the high top shelf where the library tucked away the American literature. There were mostly old anthologies that former Fulbright professors left. I climbed a shaky ladder and selected several that were within reach. Returning to the solid library floor, I began to leaf through them. I found only one play, but I was glad to see that it would fit perfectly with the other dramas I was teaching.

Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1906) was ideal in other ways as well. It should be easy to cast. Most students were too shy to take a role, but it required only five characters. Surely five would volunteer. Although the play concerns a murder, neither the murdered man nor the murderer appear on stage, and we wouldn't have to present the crime. The playwright was an Iowa native, and the play was based on a true story Glaspell had covered when she was a reporter for *The Des Moines Daily*. The characters were Iowa people from a farm and a small town, the kind I knew, far different from the urban characters in *Death of a Salesman* and the fallen Southern aristocracy in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Despite my qualms, I was delighted to

have found a play that had become a classic in American literature anthologies. It was beautifully written. It was very good American literature. I moved forward with enthusiasm.

I soon encountered our first problem -- we didn't have a stage. I asked Dr. Ibrahim if there was a stage in any of the university's buildings. Unfortunately, there were none. "You will have to improvise," he told me. I decided that probably our class auditorium could work. We could place the actors at the front where I stood to lecture, and the seating was tiered as in a typical theater.

Once I had recruited the three men and two women volunteers for the play, we began meeting after class. First, I asked them to read the play and consider what kind of character each would be portraying. And I asked them to begin to memorize their parts. At the first rehearsal we talked about the text and explored the characters. How did each actor envision his or her own character? How did each character relate to the other characters? All the volunteers were excellent students, and they recognized Glaspell's themes. Did they worry about presenting this play? I didn't ask, because I simply believed the university wanted the English students to present an American drama.

In *Trifles*, the five characters meet at the isolated farmhouse where a farmer, John Wright, has been strangled. His wife, Minnie, the main suspect, is in custody in town. Though she never appears on stage, the audience learns that she maintains that she was asleep when an unknown person entered the house and committed the murder. But the authorities believe Minnie probably has murdered her husband. Upstairs and off stage, the three men investigate the murder scene: Henderson, the county attorney, Peters the local sheriff, and Hale, a neighbor who originally discovered the murder. The play focuses on the activities of the two women, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, who deal with the "trifles" of straightening up the main floor of the house. While the men discover little to resolve the two versions of events, the women clean up and comment on what they learn about the marriage from details they notice. They build up a picture of how Mr. Wright has made his wife's life a misery, cruelly and systematically draining it of the smallest consolation for her constant labor and isolation. The women agree to conceal the main evidence they find, Minnie's pet canary that John had strangled. At the end of the play, the audience understands that Minnie killed her husband in defense of her sanity, but the investigators have no conclusive evidence. What happens at Minnie's trial remains unknown.

I explained to my actors that the play had been first performed in 1916, before American women received the right to vote or serve on juries, so they had little power. Husbands ruled the family, and the County Attorney represented the power of the government. He would decide whether or not there was evidence to charge Minnie Wright. He also would argue the case against her in court. This social and legal structure was familiar to the students, for it resembled closely the power structure of Syria.

Some aspects of the play had to be explained in terms of the setting and climate. First, the Syrian students understood farm life in terms of their country, where the farmers lived in villages and went out to their surrounding fields to tend them. Farm folks' houses were next to each other, and everyone saw everyone else on a daily basis. In Iowa and most of the Middle West, farmers had larger farms and lived in houses on their own fields. Farmers were often very isolated, especially in winter. My family farm was more than a mile away from any of the neighbors' homes. Weeks could go by when we didn't see anyone but members of our immediate family.

Secondly, climate was important. Syrians lived in a desert climate where the winters were very mild. Most of my students had never seen snow. In both places, women were responsible for preserving food. I often saw Syrian women preparing vegetables to dry in the hot summer sun for use in the winter. In Iowa, women prepared food for the winter mainly by canning in glass jars. While the method was different, the purpose was the same.

Because Iowa winters were so cold and food was preserved in jars, keeping the house warm was no trifle. If allowed to freeze, the glass jars would break and the food lost. In Syria glass jars of canned food would never freeze. It would not be obvious to them how important it was that Minnie had let the fire in her stove go out.

Soon the production was well under way. The students were learning their lines well. We had blocked out their movements in the space before the professor's desk. Then Dr. Ibrahim called me into his office.

"Dr. Struthers, we will have to cancel the play."

"Why? What's wrong?"

Dr. Ibrahim paused. He was finding it hard to answer. Finally, he said, "It's not appropriate."

Then it dawned on me. Dr. Ibrahim, or someone in charge, must have come around to reading the play! I saw then what I should have seen sooner. This patriarchal society could not tolerate a drama in which a woman probably has killed her husband, no matter how abusive he had been. Worse yet, two ordinary women, intuitively using classic discovery methods of detective stories, find evidence that the accused woman

was guilty, but sympathizing with the abused wife, they do not disclose their findings.

I saw there was nothing I could do. When I told the actors, they were disappointed. I am sure the women actors knew why, and probably the men did, too. The class was disappointed as well. There was so little recreation for young people that they had been especially looking forward to the play.

I wondered for some time after whether there was more behind the decision to cancel us. Was Dr. Ibrahim punishing me for my involvement a year before in the petition regarding the women's toilets? Was the Baath party trying again to embarrass me or to remind the students of my proper place in the power structure? Dr. Ibrahim and the Student Baath Party always did their best to make me aware that I was at the university on sufferance. I had to let the play go, but I consoled myself that seeds of possibility had been sown in those who had studied the play.

A Poetry Reading

During the second semester of my first year, I was invited to present a reading at the American Embassy in Damascus from my latest volume of poetry, *The Alcott Family Arrives*. Afterward, Gillian suggested to Dr. Ibrahim that I should give a similar reading for the students at the university. Dr. Ibrahim agreed, and I had the boys in the printing department make fliers that my students put up in all the possible places, mainly the big glass doors to the various auditoriums. All the poems in the volume were about American writers of the 18th and 19th centuries, subjects that would interest English students. The evening of the big reading arrived. I was surprised no one on the faculty talked to me about introducing me, but I did not know how readings were handled in this society, so I waited to be informed.

On the big night, I arrived at the auditorium and found many students were there, but I saw no faculty. I waited, but at ten minutes after the hour, it became obvious no faculty person was present or would come, and there would be no introduction. I would not let this obvious slap in the face defeat me. If the Baath Party wanted to embarrass me, I would pretend that I wasn't embarrassed and have a good time with the reading. So, I stood up and introduced myself and proceeded reading with enthusiasm and good cheer. I made time for the student's questions afterward, as many of the poems were about great authors they hadn't studied in their required texts. All-in-all I think the audience had an enjoyable introduction to more great American authors. I suspected again that the Baath Party was up to their usual tricks, still bitter over my partial victory in the dirty toilets affair. I was sure that Dr. Ibrahim again had forbidden the faculty to come, as they were forbidden to attend our parties.

Recommendations

In addition to sending American professors and students abroad, the Fulbright program also provides international students opportunities to study in the United States, and it invites international professors to teach or do research there. Dr. Ibrahim came to me once with a request that I put in a good word for him with Gillian, supporting his application for a faculty Fulbright grant for research and study in the United States. "It's my turn," he told me. Gillian laughed when I told her it was Dr. Ibrahim's turn. "We choose the Fulbright scholars," she said, "not the Baath Party."

Another member of the English faculty who thought he was owed a Fulbright had quite a reputation on campus. He regularly told his classes how Syrians had invented the airplane, television. the internet (which we were forbidden to use), and almost all the world's modern machines. The students laughed at him (outside of class). His eccentricities were well known, although I only knew him by reputation. One day near the end of my work at the university, this professor came to my office and pushed the Fulbright Application forms onto my desk. "It's my turn," he said. "All you have to do is sign here." He pointed to the dotted line, and then he scurried out.

I resented his high-handed manner, demanding I sign a recommendation for him to be awarded a Fulbright. After he left, his application stared up at me with the echo of his arrogance. I wrote a short note, explaining I didn't know him or his research, so it was impossible for me to sign his application. I sealed it in an envelope and put it in the campus mail, and then wrote a recommendation for Dr. Hannah. I was familiar with her teaching and her research. I was happy to suggest an American poet for her research project in the United States. Fortunately, Dr. Hannah *was* granted a Fulbright. She was a true scholar and a dedicated teacher who returned to the University of Aleppo after her study abroad. The civil war later displaced many Syrians, Dr. Hannah among them. She went to Beirut, Lebanon, to teach at the American University.

Grading Exams at Night

Despite my early surprises and difficulties at the university, I decided to apply to remain for a second year. I told the American diplomats that now I knew so much more about the students' preparation (and lack of it), the university's reference materials (and lack of them), and how things worked there. I could do a much better job

of teaching the second year. They told me they'd look for some money. With a summer to prepare, I was confident I could be of much more help to the students. The Director of the Coe College Library had written to me about a new copy machine a company was allowing Coe to try out, without any charges, and when I came home in the summer, I could reproduce a number of articles from academic journals for the Syrian students. I also had several books in my Coe office I planned to bring back, to augment the reference material available for good research papers. The diplomats "found" some money and, in the fall of 1997, after a summer at home, I returned to Aleppo — which surprised some people. The Baath Party probably had been pleased to be rid of me, and Dr. Ibrahim certainly had been glad to see my back. He had spread the story that he had helped me to get away because I had to escape. I never learned what tale he told when I returned in the fall.

At the end of my second year, the Dean of the Faculty, Dr. Mohammed offered an opportunity to remain and teach English at his International Language Institute. But by then Mel and I were anxious to return home. Before leaving, I had one more memorable adventure with exams.

Reading my last batch of exams in June 1998 was extremely difficult. I had an inflexible deadline to meet, and there was too much to do before our scheduled departure. There were more than 450 undergraduate exams and my graduate classes' exams and research papers — all this to read and grade. Also, at the last minute, Dr. Ibrahim had asked me to write another exam (I wasn't sure who would be taking it).

Then the weather turned very hot. Our 1997-8 flat, though quite comfortable, lacked ceiling fans. Our friend, Mat, took pity, and borrowed a large floor fan from ICARDA.

In the hot breeze, I poured over the 450+ blue book exams, all written by hand. Often I hesitated over obscure and sometimes puzzling writing because I wanted to give each student as much credit as possible. No matter how much I pushed myself, my eyes would not hold out for more than 50 exams a day. One evening, Mel went to a meeting of the Armenian young people, and I was all alone, working on exams.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door.

No one we knew would come to the flat without letting us know beforehand, and I was apprehensive. At the door I called out, "Who is it?"

A man's voice replied, "Have you finished the exams?"

"No! I'm working on them. You should not be asking about them. Go away."

I heard footsteps leaving. Upset, despite the heat, I hastily closed the windows and the sliding glass doors to the patio and locked them. I went back to the exams, but then I had trouble concentrating.

Mahmoud told us how students and professors could conspire to pass even though the student's name did not appear on the exam. The most common way was for the two to agree on a symbol and the page on which it would appear. Then when the professor found that specific symbol, he would grade the exam accordingly. Of course it was possible to give select students the questions in advance. The boldest and perhaps most corrupt arrangement was when the professor contacted the student's father, suggesting or even demanding payment for a passing grade. Of course, I had no interest in any of these practices, and so I had no idea who had written which exam.

I thought from the sound of the voice outside the door, it might be a man who had spoken to me at the university about how keeping his job depended on passing. I truly hoped he had written a good exam, but there was nothing I could do but finish my work. Still, the knock by a stranger in the night disturbed me. I was deciphering the handwriting in the next blue book, when there was another knock!

"When will you be finished with the exams?"

"I don't know! I'm working on them now. You should not be here asking about the exams."

Now I couldn't go on at home alone. I couldn't reach Mel. What could I do? Dr. Hannah! I phoned her and shared my story and my worry.

"I'll try to look into it," she said.

I waited anxiously, but there were no more knocks. Finally Dr. Hannah phoned. "I told my husband, and he found the guy's father. You won't be bothered anymore." I have often wondered how they did that, but I thought it unwise to ask.

I never learned whether the anxious man passed his exam, but I hope he did. If not, there was at least one other avenue to passing open to him. I remembered that Dr. Ibrahim had told me the faculty could overrule a professor's grades, failing some students if they thought too many passed or passing some if they thought too many had failed. I had seen this happen to my student who had written the petition for clean toilets. Even though she was one of my best students, she had somehow failed my exam. The man with job problems might be able to pass if he could in some way persuade the faculty to fix his grade.

This whole system angered me. One aspect of American pedagogy to which I was eager to return was the settled system of grading, a system that everyone accepted — no fixing of grades, up or down. It was rare at Coe College that a single exam grade would so decisively determine a student's future. Even in such cases, when I became aware of the consequences, I often wished that I had been more generous.

A Girl in Love

At Coe College, students had often visited my office to discuss their academic work, but just as often they came to tell me about their personal lives. I wasn't qualified to advise them, so I only sat quietly and listened. At the University of Aleppo, students always came to faculty offices in pairs or groups. They never came alone. I was surprised one day when a weeping student was sent to me unaccompanied. Just after the noon hour, Professor Rami rushed into my office. He nervously ruffled the few sparse hairs on his pate, ruining the pattern of careful strands that usually crossed it. "Can you see a woman student — " he asked, his voice shaky, "right away?"

Professor Rami's office was in a hall around the corner. When I walked past, I often saw women students sitting before his desk, where he kept a beautiful box of candies for his visitors. He was collecting the local fairy tales. Dr. Hannah told me that the old-time storytellers who used to come to people's homes were rapidly disappearing, and their stories were being lost, replaced by television. We agreed that something really valuable in Syrian literature was being lost in this process. I thought Dr. Rami might be interested in putting some of these he remembered on paper and submitting them to one of the American literary journals.

Clearly very agitated, Professor Rami continued, "I have a class right now, and I can't talk to her. She needs help immediately." Of course, I agreed. My next class wasn't until two. I had time.

Soon the young woman burst through my door, fell onto the seat before my desk and wept copiously and noisily. I slid my box of tissues toward her.

"No one can help me!" she wailed.

"What is the matter?" I asked kindly, suspecting a family member had died.

"It's so terrible." Another sob.

"You can tell me."

"No one can help me," she repeated, pulling out another wad of tissues.

"If you talk about it, maybe that will help," I coaxed.

Taking another wad, finally she whined, "I'm so in love. I'm so in love, and nobody can help me. So in love."

I got up and shut the door. I wondered why this poor suffering creature had gone to Professor Rami. All I could think to do, of course, was to listen. She mopped her tears and sobbed, "I'm so in love."

"Were you engaged?" I asked. Many of the Syrian young people became engaged, I suspected, because that was the only way of getting to know someone, since single young people were allowed talk together when they were engaged. Often when they began to get acquainted, they discovered they didn't have anything in common. I began to think maybe she had been engaged, and the young man decided he wasn't interested in her. "Is it a broken engagement?" I asked carefully.

She howled louder, "I'm so in love!" Then she crumpled up into a little ball, like one of the wads of wet tissue now filling my waste basket. We were not getting anywhere, it seemed, and I was losing patience. Finally, she looked up at me with red and swollen eyes. "I can't marry him!"

"Who?" I asked, hoping to bring this session to a close.

"Dear Professor Rami."

Stunned, I responded thoughtlessly. "But he's married!"

"I don't care," she blubbered. "I'm soooooo in love. I could be a second wife."

The comedy of this pathos did not escape me. But she was very young and took her infatuation seriously. This really was what Dr. Ibrahim would call a "delicate situation." I needed to be kind.

Women in my graduate class had told me that no woman from a good family, if not desperately poor, would consent to be the second or, even worse, the third or fourth wife. In Syria, as in many Muslim countries, a man could have as many as four wives simultaneously. It seemed to me at that time in Aleppo fewer and fewer men took multiple wives, although I suspected social mores were different in some country villages. The Quran specifies that a man must treat all his wives equally, although even Mohammed had acknowledged this probably was impossible. I was pretty sure this girl, who was attending the university and was as well dressed as the others, had parents who would never consent to her becoming a second wife.

Moreover, none of the faculty men or other professional men that we knew in Aleppo had multiple wives. I thought it highly unlikely that Professor Rami was interested in a second wife. The now quietly sobbing girl remained crumpled up beside my empty tissue box. It was time for my class, so I excused myself and left her there. When I returned, she was gone. I never saw her again, and Professor Rami never mentioned the incident again. I was reluctant to ask him about the event that apparently had embarrassed him greatly.

Later that afternoon, I heard a few of the faculty men go into the anteroom to the chairman's office. I often saw several of them sitting around the scarred coffee table that held a pitcher of water and the common glass. The girl so in love had been suffering so loudly that many must have heard her, and I was pretty sure the conversation

there was about her. Soon I heard the usual roar from the Chairman Ibrahim, and I feared Professor Rami was in big trouble. If he had been guilty of the smallest romantic word or gesture, I thought it likely he would lose his job. Here, the distance between the sexes must be maintained at all times. I had no idea why the infatuated girl felt there was any chance of marrying him. I believed Professor Rami was completely innocent. I never found out what really happened, except I suspected Dr. Hannah told Dr. Ibrahim of reports she had heard that Professor Rami was this semester's heart throb among some of the foolish romantic women.

Chaperoning Lovely Young Women in Jordan

"A pretty girl is like a melody"
~Irving Berlin

During our second year in Syria, we became acquainted with a new group of Junior Fulbrights. These were not "my students," of course, but I came to think of some of them as like my university students. Most of the new crop seemed to me to be more serious and more studious than those the year before. Because now we were old hands, Mel and I helped with their orientation in Damascus. I became especially intrigued by two of the young women. Shirley, the more outgoing, had worked for several years in Switzerland for a UN agency concerned with heath issues. Meera, in contrast, was very quiet, withdrawn and too modest, I thought. We became friends, and we came to know them well.

Meera told us she didn't know why she was awarded the privilege to study Arabic in Syria. She thought she didn't deserve it. Because the evaluators of the applications had chosen her, I was sure she was an excellent candidate. I hoped she would find more confidence. Shirley was vivacious and beautiful — she and her parents were immigrants from Iran. Meera was also the child of immigrants, hers from India. Both were Muslims, but Shirley was more western, while, whereas Meera was traditional. Before I knew she was Muslim, I asked her why, in the heat of the desert September, she always wore a sweater or blouse with long sleeves. The next day she appeared in short sleeves, but looked uncomfortable. I felt sorry and apologized. I read before coming to Syria that good Muslim women who did not cover completely were careful to always wear sleeves that covered all their upper arm. Apparently, the upper arm was a part of the female anatomy that drove Indian men wild. Women also typically wore a blouse, jacket, or sweater that was loose over the waist and covered their hips. Muslim women weren't supposed to have waistlines or butts. Of course, they always wore skirts that fell well below their knees. I, too, was always careful to dress conservatively. I hadn't come to Syria as a representative of Western fashion.

The two women asked Mel and me to accompany them on a trip to Jordan. Because the university's winter recess was a month at Christmas time, we were free to go. It would help them because we were proper chaperones; in Syria young women did not go anyplace without a parent or brother. We were glad, because we enjoyed their company, and they were helpful to us because they were fluent in Arabic. This trip turned out to be more of an adventure than we expected.

We bused to Damascus to meet the girls on Christmas Eve, planning to start out the next day. That night in our hotel room, I was suddenly awakened because Mel, sleeping next to me, was trembling violently. I sat up, grabbed his arm, "Mel, wake up! You're very sick!"

He turned over and muttered, "Don't be ridiculous."

The trembling stopped. Then I remembered the history I'd read of Syria's past earthquakes. "No," I said, "It was an earthquake. We have to get up."

Not easily roused, Mel muttered, "Don't be silly. It's not an earthquake. Go back to sleep."

I lay there for a few minutes. Nothing happened. No more shaking. I turned over and went back to sleep.

In the morning when we met the girls at the bus station they had the local newspaper with its big headline. The girls translated for us, "Earthquake!" I couldn't help beaming Mel a righteous smile.

We set out for Amman, Jordan. There we resisted the bus driver's attempts to show us hotels. From the station, we began looking for suitable nearby hotels. Mel and I had luggage, but the girls had only backpacks. Before we started out, Mel and I plotted we would agree only to very modest accommodations, because we knew the junior Fulbrights had a smaller stipend than the professors. Shirley questioned all the reception desk clerks and rejected several hotels because she didn't like something about the clerk's answers, or something else made her suspect the place might not be safe. Before long we found a place that suited the girls, and we moved in. I checked the beds, and they had only one sheet, so I asked for another. In the Middle East unless one was in a Western hotel or an expensive local one, there was always just one sheet. I always had to explain "the two-sheet rule" to the maid who came once a week to our flat in Aleppo, and she found it difficult to understand the strange

ways of Americans. When we returned later and were ready to go to bed, I found that indeed the sheet had been changed — it was a different pattern, but still only one!

After settling in, we had the whole afternoon to explore Amman, Jordan's capital. We began in the historic district. We no sooner arrived than we were approached by a man who offered to show us the Archeological Museum motioning at an iron cover in the flagstones at our feet. "Only ten dollars," he said. Shirley was suspicious, and we refused. Then we watched him approach another tourist couple. After pocketing their money, he whipped out a pair of binoculars and point them to the high hill about a half mile away. Shirley saved us from that scam.

We explored the displays in the Folklore Museum. There were beautiful old costumes, many of the women's dresses highly embroidered. There were ancient copper pots, musical instruments, etc. But the women were itching to explore the little shops nearby. As good chaperones, we went with them. The tiny hole-in-the-wall shops, open to the street, had accordion metal doors to pull down when business hours were over. The owners were anxious to lure us inside. Finally, Shirley chose one. As soon as we stepped over the threshold, the owners brought stools for Mel and me. They could not be attentive enough. They snatched two scarves off the rack and covered the stools for us, and sent a boy out for flower tea. After looking over all the merchandise, Shirley bargained with the young man in charge, and finally bought a small, hand-decorated plate. Meera bought one, too. It was a pleasure to watch Shirley bargain for better prices. That she was a very pretty girl and appealing must have helped. Who could resist her?

Later the women discovered a McDonald's! These two sophisticated graduate students were eager to eat there! Syria did not allow any foreign fast food restaurants, and they had been without Big Macs since September. So, of course, we ate our first meal in Amman at a huge McDonald's. There was a large patio, full of people dining outside on foreign gourmet food. As we entered, we met a life-sized photograph of the King and Queen of Jordan, with their family, shown entering this very eatery. In Amman, it seemed, this was *the* elite place to dine. The menu was the same as in Cedar Rapids. The girls were very happy.

I was surprised to see a large number of young women wearing the black-*abayah* or black-*hijab*, speaking American English. Shirley explained these were American Muslim girls whose traditional families sent them here to learn the Quran and absorb Arab culture. There were many in Damascus, too, she said.

Later we found a short row of fast food franchises, and for our next lunch, the women suggested we go to Wimpy's. There the young man who waited on us would not let the girls pay for their hot dogs, insisting it was his gift for the New Year's holiday. Within seconds, though, his supervisor appeared, whipped away the girl's order and re-presented it to them himself. Pretty young women can probably have the world in Jordan, or as much of it as they want.

The next morning, we took a bus to Madabah, about 30 kilometers away, to see its famous mosaics. Gillian at the American Embassy in Damascus, who had traveled widely, told me that this National Art Museum, which took in a great deal of the area of the village, had the best mosaics she had ever seen. I was eager to see them, having admired several in the Louvre in Paris. In preparing for my time in Syria, I had learned that ceramic tiles were an important art of the Middle East. A good-looking young man at the museum gate sold us our tickets. However Shirley, perhaps emboldened by her bargaining victories the day before, began to cajole the young man to let her and Meera in free. "We are poor students, and we really can't afford…" Mel and I disapproved but held our tongues. We were not her parents.

The mosaics, formerly the floors of houses, were mostly constructed by local artisans during the Roman occupation, beginning in 64 BC, although some dated from the later Ummayad period of the 7th and 8th centuries CE. After the mosaics were rediscovered, the Jordanian government bought a whole row of these houses and tore them down to expose the mosaic floors. We admired the artistry of the scenes of nature and events from Roman mythology. My favorite depicted in each of its four corners a tree representing a season. The spring tree had golden flowers; summer had golden fruit. The most famous floor mosaic was in St. George's Greek Orthodox Church. Only about one-third of its original remained. It is believed to be a map of Jerusalem in 542 CE, showing a number of Christian churches and roads that have since been proven to be in those exact locations.

As we explored, a car stopped near us. An older man emerged and introduced himself as the director of the site. I saw the young man from the ticket office in the car's passenger seat. The director asked cordially whether we were enjoying the mosaics, and we chatted a little about the displays. Then he asked to see our ticket stubs. Mel and I produced ours. The girls were embarrassed that they could not. The director then motioned for the young man to join us, and he asked the girls politely if they had paid. Shirley confessed for both of them. Then they produced the fee for the director. He wished us a good day, and he drove off with the crestfallen young man. Shirley was chagrined; she might have caused the

young man to lose his job. Though pretty young women usually could get what they wanted in Jordan, they should not always ask.

The next morning, we were back at the bus station to catch a ride to Petra, the famous "Rose City" of Jordan, a World Heritage Site. The main feature is the group of very large structures carved into sandstone, some of it pink or rose. Other buildings show layers of brown and blue. All of this had been done in the 1st century CE by an Arabic tribe called the Nabatenians. They were an advanced society for their time, with sophisticated engineering. They had carved channels to save water and transport it to cisterns and reservoirs. This site along the ancient Silk Road was ideal for merchant traders of spices and scents from the orient, including frankincense and myrrh. After sea lanes became established for faster and cheaper transportation, Petra declined, and after the earthquake of 363 the town was largely abandoned. Because of its almost hidden location, it was long forgotten except by the local Bedouins.

As our bus puttered across the desert to Petra, I was surprised to see two women standing beside the road. They signaled the driver, who stopped to let them board. The British women had been staying at a remote lodge down an almost invisible path. Later, the bus stopped again, to pick up a young man. He spoke excellent English, and Mel got acquainted with him. He was an American, studying in Jordan, and he had relatives in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. His uncle played tennis with Mel! We believed this was evidence of the world getting smaller. Cedar Rapids, in fact, had a substantial Arab population, most descended from immigrants who came a century ago from the Becca Valley, which at that time was part of Syria and the French protectorate.

Since Petra was rediscovered in 1812 by Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, it had become a tourist attraction. By the 1990s, it was Jordan's most visited site. A village, Wadi Musa, had grown up near the entrance road into Petra. The bus driver, as was typical, tried to let the passengers off at a hotel of his choice, undoubtedly paid by the owner to bring prospective guests to his door. Here, too, Shirley rejected his choice, and we ended up at the Moon Valley Hotel. It was managed by two young men who showed us plain, but clean and comfortable rooms. We arranged to eat our breakfasts and evening meals at the hotel. Also typically, the young men fell all over themselves to be accommodating to these two beautiful girls. They didn't believe that Mel and I, blue-eyed and blond, were the parents of these two brunette, brown-eyed girls. But we all enjoyed the charade. Shirley questioned them about the distance to Petra's entrance, and they convinced her it was within easy walking distance.

The next morning I was awakened by cries of, "Taxi, Taxi." When I looked out the window, there were ten-year-old boys, bringing donkeys into the town. Although it was only the beginning of the day, the poor donkeys already had a put-upon look in their eyes and a defiant twitch to their ears. I laughed. Mel and I would walk on the impressive ¾ mile trail, called the *Siq* (shaft), into Petra. Later we learned there were not only the donkey taxis, but also camel rides.

At the breakfast table we met a mysterious group of people. One man was quite unlike most Arab men, who are so often very handsome, reminding me of the Egyptian movie star, Omar Sharif (1932-2015), who had co-starred in *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). This fellow was at least middle-aged, quite small in stature, and although his Arab nose was prominent, his eyes were small, and his features wizened. Sitting beside him was a plump, bleached-blond woman, not young either, who introduced herself as Dr. Nadine Gordon, a professor from a New York university, doing research in Jordan. She and the dried up little man beside her acted like a couple, and she seemed to be very familiar with the hotel, getting up and going out to the kitchen from time to time. I thought perhaps Professor Gordon or her little friend could be owners of the hotel. She had volunteered that they couldn't stand Ramadan in the Middle East and always flew off to Paris for that month. Was this her usual residence? Were the other men around the table employees or cousins from the town? Were the two gracious young men who were managing the place also part-owners? the sons of the owners? merely lucky young men from the town who were able to get good jobs? However they were connected, they all were friendly, and we conversed in their bits of English and our bits of Arabic, laughing a lot.

Somewhat surprisingly, Jordan was a popular destination for Israeli vacationers. The political animosity between the countries was evident even among vacationers and their hosts. The young managers at the Moon Valley Hotel told us about two young Israeli men who trashed their room before they left. We did not know whether we should credit this information or chalk it up to political hostility. Later we met a vacationing couple when we were returning to Amman on the bus. They spoke American English, but hesitated to tell us where they were from. It eventually came out they were Americans who had resettled in Israel. They believed there was enough prejudice against Israeli vacationers that they were reluctant to reveal their nationality where anyone in the local community might hear them.

After breakfast, eager to begin our exploration of Petra, we soon were walking down the *Siq* to the opening, which for so many years

had been hidden from most of the world. The rock walls beside us were high and the road in was narrow, only ten to thirteen feet wide. A guide with the group ahead of us, from time to time pointed out channels cut in the rock. These were remarkable examples of the engineering that brought water to Petra when the city was a center of the international spice trade. After about three-fourths of a mile a small cleft appeared in the rock walls, through which we saw the magnificent pinkish-red building carved from a rock face directly ahead of us. It was two stories high with a broken pediment at the top and, at its bottom, statues of Pollux and Castor. Its columns were mostly Corinthian in style. All of this reflects the architecture of Alexandria, Egypt, the most prominent city in the Middle East at the time. Archeologists do not agree about the function of this building, although today it is called the Treasury. Maybe it once held treasures, or maybe not. Rumors have grown up around it, all of them about secret hiding places within. That is why the façade was pock-marked by bullet holes from Bedouins firing at it, hoping to displace its supposedly hidden treasures. We explored the fascinating structures carved out from the rock face, marveling at the accomplishments of a people who did not have modern technology or tools.

Weary at the end of the day, after we trudged back to the Moon Valley Hotel, we found that in the living room we could order a cup of not tea to tide us over until the evening meal. The young men seemed even more attentive. We saw that they wanted to impress the young women with us, but that they also believed it was prudent to be gracious to their chaperones. We were amused by their repeated hints of doubt about our parentage. Shirley persuaded them to provide some evening entertainment. She asked if they could get the Jordanian Desert Patrol dancers to come. Sure enough, a request from a pretty girl had its effect. The next evening eight men dressed in the uniform of the old Jordanian Desert Patrol arrived, and they performed the traditional dance. It was delightful. I wished I could learn that dance, but they said that women could not learn those steps. "For the women there is belly dancing."

We found that belly dancing was a family entertainment in Syria. One Sunday, we had dinner with the Gregorians at Mr. Petro's club for Christians. There, with a number of Syrian families, including numerous children, we were entertained by a middle-aged belly dancer. She was very good, and no one seemed to be offended by what seemed to me to be quite provocative movements.

Shirley also asked if the young men could obtain a copy of the film, *Indiana Jones and The Raiders of the Lost Ark.* And the following evening, we saw the film featuring the Treasury of Petra. We saw the old legend of ancient treasure resurrected with modern technology and Western imagination.

After several days of exploring Petra, it was time to move on to Aqaba by the sea. This time we went to the bus station and found a car to take us. We three women rode in the back, with Mel in the passenger seat beside the driver. When we were ready to go, the driver stalled. He wanted one more paying passenger, and soon another man slid in beside Mel. In Aqaba, we used our usual procedure of looking at nearby hotels, again keeping in mind the girl's finances. After a fruitless search, Mel spotted a car rental office. He was pretty sure the clerk there would speak English and perhaps could tell us where to find the moderately priced hotels. The good-looking young man (another one!) behind the desk first took notice of our "daughters." Once again, we traded on their youth and beauty to expedite our travel. The clerk, Hassen, eagerly closed the office, locked the door and took us around the corner to a hotel where his friend, Mustaffa, yet another good-looking young man, was the clerk.

After inspecting the rooms, the girls were satisfied, so we moved in. It was only a few days until the 31st of December, and Mel wanted to find a New Year's Eve party. Though it seemed to be short notice, Mustaffa was glad to try to find one for us. In the meantime, Hassen, who had access to a car, took us out to the beach, deserted in mid-winter. We could see that the stretch of beautiful white sand would make this an ideal summer tourist spot. Aqaba was Jordan's only outlet to the sea. This coast of the Red Sea had become an attraction for divers because its coral reefs were among the best in the world. The day was cloudy, windy and cold, and we were not inclined to inquire about diving. From the beach, we could look across to the Israeli town of Eliat. Because Fulbrights were prohibited from going to Israel, we could not take the short trip over. With an Israeli stamp on our passport, we'd not be able to return to Syria, so we could only gaze longingly at the nearby white city across the Gulf of Aqaba.

The second day Mustaffa announced proudly that he had found a New Year's party for us. It was at a big hotel with dinner and dancing. We were very grateful. Furthermore, he announced, he and Hassen would take us all.

"All?" Shirley asked.

"Yes," he said. "We're all going."

"All?" I asked. Was a "date" with our "daughters" appropriate, even when supervised?

"Yes, me and Hassen from the car rental."

"We didn't know about that," Shirley said.

But our clerk was nodding happily. It seemed to be settled.

In the meantime, we looked at the historical sites in the town. During World War I, the Turks, allies of Germany, controlled Aqaba. They had positioned a row of cannons on the beach, pointed out to sea to defy a British naval invasion, which they were sure would come from that direction. As we walked among some of those remaining cannons, we recalled the movie, *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), depicting T. E. Lawrence's successful surprise attack with his Arab army — from the desert side.

The New Year's Eve dinner at the hotel began at eight. When Mel and I were ready, we awaited the girls in the lobby, wondering what they would wear to a party, since they each brought only a backpack, not really large enough for party dresses. They soon came down wearing pretty blouses and their usual dark slacks and tennis shoes. They told me that when traveling, they wore three layers of clothes beneath their jackets. That enabled them to bring more clothes.

Hassen from the car rental arrived. He and Mustaffa were dressed up and smiling broadly. They wore new shirts and knock-off jeans, like those I had often seen on my university students.

Soon we were seated at a tiny table next to a local family, parents with two little boys and a baby in a carrier. In the Arab world, children did not miss any parties. We were just in time for the buffet — a wonderful row of the Syrian foods we all loved. After a little while the music started, a small orchestra with a woman singer. She wore what in the U. S. would have been called a wedding dress, white with fancy ruffles. I had often seen this kind of dress in shop windows in Aleppo. She sang in Arabic. We recognized one song that was then playing on speakers from all the Aleppo record shops, "Habbi." The word means beloved, and the song is almost exclusively a repetition of this word, enough to drive you crazy if you are a parent or an older adult.

After people finished eating, the dancing began. Arab couples do not dance together, unless they are Westernized or brave. The men in the crowd got up and danced by themselves or, sometimes, in a line. The father next to us took his small sons in his arms, first one, then the other, and danced them around the floor, teaching them the rhythms. So did many other men in the crowd.

Whenever the band played a slow tune, Mel and I danced together. We had a good time as the evening danced on. We noticed at the far end of the room, several tables of people dressed as Westerners, and they also danced to the slow tunes. I asked the young men with us to inquire of our waiter, if he knew who they were. It turned out they were from one of the European oil companies, exploring off-shore in the Mediterranean.

Although Islam forbids alcohol, the international hotels in many countries were allowed to serve it. Mel and I rarely drank, and we did not order anything when the waiter came around. However, the two young men, increasingly daring, ordered beer, as did Shirley. Meera did not. After a while another slow dance tune began, and Hassen boldly asked Shirley to dance. After they went out on the floor, Mustaffa plucked up some courage and asked Meera. Reluctant at first, she finally nodded in agreement, and soon they were dancing too. Both girls were very good dancers, despite the fact they were wearing their sturdy tennis shoes for exploring the ruins.

Suddenly, it was midnight — 1998. But there was no sign of it in this big room. About fifteen minutes after the hour, waiters came along with noise makers and paper hats. Did Jordan, also, operate on "Syrian Time?" The oil people began singing a boozy, slurred version of "Auld Lang Syne" and the girls asked me about its meaning. I translated the Scottish words, and soon we, too, sang the traditional New Year's Eve song, but without slurring the words. The young men joined us.

Mel and I, pleading our elderly status, decided to walk back to the hotel. "No, no," Mustaffa objected. "No," Hassen objected, too. "We must drive." They were being very polite.

We tried to decline the ride, but then Meera also insisted: "We have to go back." She seemed quite upset. Shirley sighed reluctantly. It was hard to end such a lovely evening. We drove back in silence.

I wondered what the young people were thinking at the end of the evening and the beginning of a new year. The young men were very impressed with themselves, having enjoyed their brief fling at being like Westerners. They surely would make the best of this night. They will meet their friends outside the video store, I imagined, and brag about their American girl friends, about dancing with Americans. Perhaps they would make up stories — that their dates begged them to come to America with them, how the girls could get green cards for them, how they promised to bring all their families later. Whatever the adventure meant to the boys, I was sure it had been only a bit of fun for the American girls. Maybe Shirley would write to an American friend about her date with this nice, but gauche Arab boy. Maybe she would become an American diplomat as she was planning. Or she might change her mind and work abroad for an American company. Whatever she chose, she would do it with enthusiasm and panache. I imagined Meera's future would be a different story. It seemed clear that she was not very pleased with how the evening had gone. In the car, she was

quiet, more quiet than she had ever been. Would she go back to Chicago, finish her Masters, and make an interesting career? Or would she end up like those black-clad girls in McDonald's, putting on the *hijab* and the *abayah*. I suspected then that her conservatism would prevail, and this proved prophetic sooner than I expected, not long after we returned to Syria.

"Tomorrow," Mel said, "we begin the new year at Wadi Rum."

Wadi Rum is famous in the West because T.E. Lawrence and his Arab Army rested there before his dawn attack on the Turkish Army at Aqaba. It was also important for the ancient petroglyphs scratched or carved on its rocks. Because Wadi Rum is close to Aqaba, we decided to take a taxi for a day. Our driver was thinking about the present, not the past, however. He said he was saving his money for the dowry he needed to pay the father of his fiancée, about $10,000 U.S. dollars. Among Muslims, in addition to having to wait for the father to choose someone for him or her, the prospective husband or his family had to pay a bride price. This sum was paid to a girl's family, so they could take care of her in case of divorce. For especially beautiful girls, or girls from a prominent family, this was often a large amount. I heard stories of asking prices of $1000 or more, although I'm not sure they were true. So Shirley was skeptical about the ten thousand: "For that price, she has to be a princess."

Because a man must have enough for the dowry, many men cannot marry when they are young. It was common to see middle-aged or even elderly men with very young wives. My carpet seller in Aleppo was silver-haired with a much younger wife and a four-year-old son. I made the mistake of assuming the child was his grandson. "No," he said proudly, "my son."

We were impressed by our first sight of Wadi Rum, a massive rock formation jutting out of the reddish sands. It looked like seven enormous pillars locked together. It is now named the seven pillars of wisdom, after the title of T.E. Lawrence's most famous book. This is just one of the enormous stone outcroppings in this three-hundred acres of desert sand. Archeologists determined that since ancient times, when this valley enjoyed a warm, humid climate, it had been inhabited by waves of humans: the Thamudic, believed to have come from what is now Iran, the Nabateans, who lived in what is now Jordan, and most recently, the Arabs. The Muslim holy book, the Quran, notes the lofty pillars and adds a variation of the ancient flood story, in which the inhabitants were punished for refusing to worship Allah by being buried in an apocalyptic sand storm. Indeed, there are miles of sand throughout the countries of what had been "the fertile crescent." Much of today's Middle East is desert. Lawrence, who knew the desert well, describes it as "an ocean in which no oar is dipped."

In addition to desert, the area of Wadi Rum includes other cliffs, outcroppings of basalt and sandstone, some of them scratched or cut with ancient maps and pictures.

In a parking lot we found an array of old pickup trucks. We joked that some of them were ancient enough to have been there before that sand storm in the Quran engulfed the region. They were outfitted with benches for passengers along the sides of the cargo space. Shirley inspected them, talked to the drivers and chose one for us. Soon we were rattling across the desert toward a big pile of rocks. Our driver pointed toward a small cleft in the massive rocks, where we would find petroglyphs. Picking our way on unsteady boulders with no handrails, we found these ancient signs. We guessed as to what they said, making up stories and speculating about the instructions.

"The nearest tavern is this way."

"Come buy your camel from us! Fastest camels in the desert."

"Beware! the Fulbrights are coming."

The petroglyphs have suffered damage from erosion, vandals, tourists, and treasure hunters. Archeologists believe some of these petroglyphs probably tell the directions to hidden springs, valuable information in a seemingly featureless desert. More recently, the archeologists have trained local Bedouin to find, document the lost sites, and photograph them with smart phones. These local people have found more sites, and now visitors can view petroglyphs of animals that once lived here: ostrich, lion, ibex, oryx, and hyena. There are also depictions of humans. We learned these petroglyphs are helping to unravel the mysteries of how writing began and about the development of early art, two essentials to the growth of civilization.

I wondered about the lives of those early people. What were their dreams and hopes? Surely people have always had both. Surely, both men and women had always seen there was more than the mere struggle to have enough to eat and some kind of safety. For centuries before the advent of Mohammed and his religious movement, beginning in the 600s CE, the ancient tribes of the Middle East lived by herding their livestock — sheep, camels, and horses — following the rains that provided forage, and when an opportunity presented itself, raiding other tribes or travelers. They left behind these traces of their civilization for us and other later arrivals to wonder about.

As our day in the desert drew to a close, the driver asked if we'd like to watch the sunset from Um Sabatah, a pile of rocks easily climbed, with excellent perches for observing the land and the sky. Watching the sunset was a frequent

recreation in Syria and in other countries of the Middle East. The desert sky often provides a spectacular scene as the sun goes down. I remembered that Lawrence watched the sunset from this very pile of rocks on the evening before he and his fierce allies invaded the Turks' camp at Aqaba. He must have mused about the next day and the next months and years for his Arab fighters. Did he anticipate the coming British and French betrayal of the Middle East?

One day at the university, I mentioned Lawrence in class. I was surprised when one student came to me after class and told me Lawrence had betrayed the Arabs; he was not a hero in the Middle East. I learned the Middle Eastern version of Arab history differed greatly from the popular Western version. So, I was not so surprised when Mel and I found only one very slight mention of Lawrence in the Syrian History Museum in Damascus. Western understanding of the history of the Middle East had been shaped by Lowell Thomas, who eventually became a popular radio broadcaster. After World War I, Thomas traveled in the Middle East, where he shot dramatic film of Col. T. E. Lawrence. He returned to the U.S. and quickly gained a reputation as a lecturer, using his film to illustrate a highly romantic story of Lawrence's war-time adventures during the Arab Uprising of 1917-19. This compelling adventure became the basis for the 1962 film, *Lawrence of Arabia.* On the other hand, the Arab version of Lawrence portrays him as a traitor, having betrayed the Arabs to the British and French governments, who, at the peace talks after World War I, divided the Middle East between them. Lawrence had promised the Arabs independence, but they became European protectorates. It may be an error to blame Lawrence for the ambitions of the British and French governments at the Peace talks in 1918, because historians do not agree on when Lawrence discovered Britain's ambitions in the Middle East. However, those 1918 boundaries have been causes of conflict ever since.

As I watched the sunset, though I remembered Lawrence, I thought more about the processes of civilization, and the genius of ancient people who had ideas about communication over miles of seemingly empty desert and who were inspired by whatever mysterious forces still inspire artists. With improvised tools they labored (because carving in rock is not easy) to picture realistically the animals and people they saw and to show the ways to hidden places. The Seven Pillars of Wisdom at the portal of Wadi Rum might be the spines of books, with pages that have not yet divulged the wisdom that could bring peace to the Middle East. Europeans have come through this place more than most of us realize because of trade, especially in luxury goods, such as spices and scents from Yemen, cedar from Lebanon, and later, silk from China. These merchant's stories of their travels circulated from port to port, trading center to trading center, and ideas traveled with them, some drawn from the petroglyphs of Wadi Rum. Civilization as we know it grew, art developed, practical and artistic skills were discovered, added to, refined as various people found them and saw ways to apply them in their own lives. It's fascinating to read on the stones of Wadi Rum some of the beginnings of world knowledge.

After this trip, we met our "daughters" again at Assistant Ambassador Jim Wilson's big party, memorable for the break-up of his relationship with Gillian. I was glad to see them. Shirley greeted us warmly.

"How is everything?" I asked.

"Not so good," Shirley said. "Meera has become more religious."

Mel and I knew that although Shirley was from a Muslim family, she carried the religion lightly, while Meera did not. Meera had danced with a boy at a New Year's Eve party in Jordan, and I suspected she was feeling guilty.

"She won't let the Fulbright boys come over to our flat anymore."

"That will make your landlord happy," I said. I had heard their landlord had been shocked when the girls had invited the male Fulbrights over for a meal.

"She won't let me keep beer in the refrigerator for them or for me. I reminded her that we shared, and I could do what I wanted in my half, but she insisted. There would be no beer in the flat, and she gave me the Muslim sermon on strong drink, quoting the *Quran*. So I gave in." This divergence of their views must have been painful for both of these friends.

I remember a story I had heard of a very devout young student who had refused to shake hands with me when we were first introduced. He had received a scholarship to study in England, where he met a woman from Sweden and went there to live with her. Some of the young Muslims became more liberal when in contact with the Western world, and others, like Meera, turned more strongly toward their traditions.

Courtship in Syria

Though I centered my academic attention upon engaging my students with American Literature, I was well aware that education was far from being the only thing on their minds. Most were unmarried, and like young, single people everywhere, they were interested in finding spouses. This seemed to me especially difficult in a society dominated by ancient patriarchal rules governing the interactions between men and women of all ages. The relations between young, unmarried males and females were rigidly policed.

From time to time, I invited students to evening gatherings at our flat. To these parties I also invited Mahmoud and his older brother, a law student who had become another of Mel's friends. The women were those whom I had come to know, mostly from my graduate class, but also a few seniors who were sisters or cousins of the graduate students came as well. Students knew they had to be extraordinarily circumspect because of the social restrictions. Though there were many significant looks, the young men and women spoke to each other very little.

One day Mahmoud's brother, Yousef, came to Mel with a problem. He was interested in one of the young women in the English Department, and she was one of those that came to our little parties. He thought she was interested in him, too. Yousef was crazy about her, but he was in despair about the next required step, meeting with her father. One of his friends had told him her father, a physician, was very strict and didn't believe any young man was good enough for his daughter. Apparently, the woman had told her mother about Yousef, and her mother prevailed on the father to allow him a meeting.

Mel thought perhaps the problem was economic class. We had noted that the engaged couples we saw seemed to come from the same economic background. Mahmoud and Yousef's family had an oil business, and perhaps the girl's physician family, besides having the prestige and income doctors had in that society, was also independently wealthy. Yousef had come to Mel for advice about his first interview the next day.

The doctor's new house was in the medical quarter, only a few blocks from our flat. As it turned out, there were ten interviews between Yousef and the doctor. Before every one, Yousef stopped at our house for a pep talk with Mel before entering what must have seemed to him like the lion's den.

Callie, one of my Muslim graduate students, became friendly with a very good-looking young Christian man. They were seen talking and laughing with each other. Of course, she was considered very imprudent – even a disgrace – because she talked with a man who wasn't in her family. I asked her what might happen if they decided they wanted to marry. She laughed and said, "This is what my father would do," drawing her finger across her throat,

We had heard that Alawite Muslim girls could choose their own husbands. President al-Assad's tribe was Alawite. Mr. Gregorian told us they were very liberal religiously, and they didn't even have mosques. We met one young married Alawite woman whom the Gregorian daughters told me had chosen her own husband. I'm not sure that this was accurate. She was very beautiful though, which gives women some extra power to make choices.

I was told the Quran forbade any woman from entering a marriage if she didn't consent. However, if the family was very poor, a girl could find an offer of a bride price hard to refuse. What could she say if her younger brothers and sisters were going hungry, knowing that her bride price would help feed the family?

When I came to know some of my women students, I learned that often a woman's education would discount her asking price — educated women had gained the reputation for resisting conformity to the traditional woman's role: cook great meals, bear many sons, and obey in silence.

Although most young men obeyed parental cautions against talking to women, they enjoyed looking at them. A group of men, students and even young professionals from the town, gathered on the steps of the Language and Literature Building every afternoon when classes were over to watch the women emerge. The women ignored them or pretended to. I could see how hard it was for young people to socialize in any meaningful way.

For most unmarried Muslims in Aleppo, the path of romance was strewn not with roses, but with stones.

Arno Gregorian told us about the problems of courtship he had seen in the Armenian Christian community. Their restrictions were not as severe as among traditional Muslims, but they could present problems. Although the Christian community did not practice arranged marriages, sometimes their protocol seemed very similar to those of their Muslim neighbors. Still, these young people could meet for English lessons at the Armenian club, and they could have supervised picnics. Mel and I chaperoned a lot of picnics.

We became acquainted with young woman and a man who was the proprietor of a camera and photo shop. The woman's mother made her disapproval very clear. She did not think he was good enough for her daughter, and I guessed there was a disparity in the two families' financial

situations. When we left Aleppo, they were still looking longingly at each other.

Some of the young Christian men went to London for jobs, and they often returned temporarily to Aleppo, looking for a wife. One of the young women in the Young People's Armenian group became engaged to and then married one of these returners. Whether she knew him earlier, we didn't know. She was a glowing, beautiful bride, so I hope she was happy in cold and dreary London.

Another attractive woman who came to the Armenian Young Peoples' group was a bleached-blond hairdresser who had her eye on Arno. He showed no interest in her, and Mel asked him why.

"When you marry here, you marry the whole family. I could not stand to be married with that mother-in-law."

Armenian families we knew were very close, eating every Sunday dinner together, and often other meals in between. Once a young couple married, this combined both families. To Arno that would mean all Sunday dinners, all birthdays, all graduations, all confirmations spent with an unbearable mother-in-law.

Rina's Story

In Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, an unctuous clergyman, his marriage proposal refused by Elizabeth Bennet, reminds her that because of her family's financial situation, "it is by no means certain that another offer of marriage may be made to you. Your portion [inheritance] is so small…" Later her future husband Mr. Darcy tells Elizabeth that although he has fallen in love with her, they cannot marry because her family is so "decidedly beneath my own…" These fictional characters would have understood the strictures of the Muslim and Christian societies in Aleppo. Both had their rules, and in both, men and women constantly schemed to get around them.

Parents arranged most Muslim marriages, and there was traditional protocol that many families observed. Young Muslims, even if their parents were more liberal than the tradition demanded, still had to keep in mind the restraints of their grandparents and older aunts and uncles. One of my students, Rina, whose family had lived in Canada where she had been born, told me about an evening when her family entertained another family that was looking for a bride. Rina told her story this way:

The evening of their visit arrived. Mama, Papa, and me and my sisters sat in a row on one side of the room. The other family, parents, two sisters, and the boy, sat on the other. His mother and sisters all wore the face veil. "Not good," I thought. Our fathers tried to make conversation. First Papa said, "The wheat crop in the country looks good this year." He always likes to talk about the crops because he is from a village where they're all farmers.

Mr. al-Mohammed was interested because he, too, was from one of the villages, although he owned a towel factory now. They talked about wheat, kinds of seed, irrigation, the old water wheels versus the new pumps, the cotton crop the government was requiring all the farmers to plant. It was all very boring.

Finally, Mama asked if they'd like a cup of tea. Of course, his mother said that would be nice. Mama gestured for me to come help her. She wanted to demonstrate what a good housewife I would be. She was afraid I would never get married. She had told me that many men don't want an educated wife. I knew it was true. But I didn't want a husband who didn't want an educated wife. I noticed that Yousef, the young man, sat there like a lump.

"Rina made these little date cakes," my mother said proudly. It was true that I had helped chop the dates. I passed around the little cakes we had made. Yousef took two. I know that pleased Mama.

Finally, his mother brought up the problem she wanted to talk about. "Does Rina plan to veil later?"

Mama began, "Well … well…."

She knew she was in trouble, and I had to interrupt, "I probably won't veil" I knew I would never veil, but I didn't want to disappoint Mama too much. She didn't veil, but she knew if I didn't, that changed the number of men who might want to marry me. I also knew if I decided to veil, she would help me willingly.

"How did this turn out?" I asked.

"To everyone's satisfaction," Rina replied with a smile.

Visitors from Coe College

Dr. Ibrahim, Dr. Hannah and other faculty members often complained to me that the Syrian students didn't seem to learn to write English well. The students told me their professors seemed most concerned that they spell and punctuate correctly. I thought good writing was connected with good thinking and that practice was essential. I wanted them to learn to clearly state a thesis and develop examples to support it. I was interested in students' thinking and ideas, but it seemed to me, in contrast, the Aleppo faculty focused too much on the mechanics of writing.

In talks with my Aleppo colleagues, I had extolled the methods used at Coe College to help students improve their writing — especially the tutelage of Dr. Robert Marrs and his Writing Center, where top students tutored other students who were having difficulty examining their ideas, developing strong theses, organizing the supporting information, making their sentences interesting as well as correct. I had the highest regard for this way of teaching writing.

I conferred with the English chairman, Dr. Ibrahim, and also the Dean of the Language and Literature Department, the people who had power, trying to interest them in bringing Dr. Marrs to Aleppo. They were quick to tell me they were interested, but there were no funds. Not discouraged, I wrote to Dr. Marrs and asked if he would like to come, if the money could be secured.

I was hopeful, though I had no funds, because recently the diplomats in Damascus had "found" the funds for my salary for a second year at the University of Aleppo, so there might be some secret pots of money to bring together some American and Syrian students and, perhaps, help improve writing instruction at the university. I made my pitch to the diplomats, emphasizing what a difference students working with other students had made at Coe College. Would this magic work in Syria? Surprise again! They found the money, enough for Dr. Marrs to visit all four universities in the country.

Dr. Marrs wanted to bring three of his advanced students with him, and somehow, he also "found" some money at Coe College. His wife, Margie, who taught voice in Coe's Music Department, contacted the diplomats, and they arranged for her to give several local concerts. All the foreign embassies in Damascus brought their nationals for special programs. The American Embassy didn't have to "find" this money, so this was easily arranged.

Gillian wanted the students to have home stays so they could get to know the local people and local people could see what good kids the American students were. It was no easy task to arrange this, however. When I first asked the Gregorians about this, they objected that Syrian students did not have sleep-overs. This sort of thing was never done. Some Aleppo University students, however, thought this was a very good idea. Though I did all I could, I did not find places for all of the American students.

I believe I was as excited as the students on the day in 1998, when Dr. Marrs arrived with Jennifer, Claire, and Matthew. Dr. Marrs gave several short lectures for students and faculty, explaining the methods of the Writing Center and how students worked with other students to improve their papers. He also met with faculty to discuss how professors read and responded to student papers. The American students' one-on-one sessions with Syrian students over their papers were especially well-received, and I was delighted. The Syrian students liked the Americans immediately. They were very anxious to have help on their current papers, and many signed up for those sessions.

The Coe students offered a collaborative method of improving papers. Claire reported that some Syrian students were skeptical about getting help from their fellow students, whose English was "just as bad as their own." It would be a self-defeating waste of time to consult with fellow students: "Only the professor's opinion matters." Syrian students found the idea of collaboration with each other difficult and remained skeptical of its value, but they enjoyed interacting with Coe students, who became very popular.

At the end of their first week, the Coe group had to move on to their next destination, Latakia's Tishreen University, where they were again to work with students and faculty on ways to improve student writing. I said good-by to them reluctantly, but I wasn't as reluctant as the Aleppo students.

The Aleppo students had observed the Americans carefully, noting, for example, that Matt had worn the same necktie every day. On the day of their departure, the students presented him with a new tie so he would have two. On the day the Americans left for Latakia, I ran into the Dean of the Faculty, Dr. Mohammed, late in the afternoon and mentioned their departure. He looked stunned. "I'm so sorry; I didn't know," he said. "I would have sent an escort with them." I knew what he really meant was that he would have sent along minders to make sure they didn't visit with any disgruntled villagers or see some facility the government was keeping secret. I suspect these friendly exchanges between students did not delight the Baath Party that wanted to portray everything Western as immoral or without value.

Marjorie Fuller, the other Fulbright professor in Syria, who had come for the academic year of 1997-98, had established strong ties in Latakia's Christian community and was able to arrange several home stays with students at Tishreen

University. When in Latakia, staying in an Orthodox Christian home, Jennifer was asked about life in America. Rim, their daughter, who had just graduated from college, believed that "all Americans, regardless of religion, were totally sexually free — and American parents did not care what we did." Jennifer was quick to disabuse her of this notion. The mother of Claire's host family told her, "I feel for you. There are a lot of Negroes in the U.S. causing problems, I think?" Jennifer replied that her black friends were good people, "I think Black people aren't any more generally bad than white people, but that is how they are shown in films and in the news."

Claire also encountered troubling questions. At a home stay in Latakia, the first question the host student, Amil, asked was, "What religion are you?" In Syria, where so many people were pious, it seemed unthinkable that anyone could be without religion. She assumed Claire must be Jewish, that all Americans were Jewish. When Claire explained she wasn't certain of her parents' religion, but thought they were Methodist, Amil seemed to assume this was some branch of Judaism.

There was almost unanimous resentment of Jews in Aleppo, a result of the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, when many of the Palestinian Muslim residents fled before the Israeli army or were forced out by false promises from the new government to let them return in a few days. Of course, the local Jews in Aleppo weren't responsible for these problems, but because there was strong feeling against anyone who was Jewish, in 1992 President al-Assad gave permission for Syrian Jews to immigrate. Most Jews, fearing for their safety, elected to leave. In 1996 it was estimated there were only 50 Jews left in the city, and their synagogue was closed. It was sad to see in Aleppo's antique stores big baskets of books printed in Hebrew script, abandoned when their owners had to leave their homes because of political hatred.

The Christian community was as much against Israel as the Muslim community. Anti-Jewish sentiment had been exacerbated by Syria's participation in the unfortunate Six Day War, when Syria and a number of Arab states attacked Israel with terrible results. A downed Israeli aircraft was displayed on the University of Aleppo's parade ground, but Syrian participation in that war had been disastrous. The Israelis thereafter occupied Syria's Golan Heights. All Syrian men had two years of required military service. Mr. Petro Gregorian and his good friend from Aleppo had been soldiers in the Six Day War.

Claire had an interesting conference with three women who were "well hidden in mounds of clothing." They wanted Claire's comments on a paper one of them had written on Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen's heroines. She was uncertain how to reply when they asked if she was a feminist. Hesitantly, she replied in the affirmative, and they surprised her, all three saying, "We are feminists, too." Claire knew that some believed that the use of covering, and especially the face veil, freed women from the tyranny of fashion, but she didn't expect these women to be so frankly subversive. In Syria in 1998 a woman *could* be a feminist, but if her father said she must cover, then she must, no matter her personal wishes.

One of the most startling discoveries the Coe group made was the attitude of many faculty members. At Tishreen University, the English Department Chair, during a session with both faculty and students, excoriated her students, saying "modern students don't work as hard as I did." When Jennifer explained their collaborative method at Coe, one student replied she didn't think her teachers had enough interaction with students, and her professor jumped in immediately saying, "That's your problem." At another university some faculty even made derogatory remarks about their student's writing in front of them. Dismissing students and their needs in these ways surprised Coe's students, accustomed as they were to a small-college learning environment characterized by close collaboration with both faculty and their fellow students.

Professors in Syria were generally admired, sometimes to the point of adulation. Yet there was a constantly visible gulf between students and faculty. Men students told me that at the end of classes each day, when they would gather on the university steps to watch people, especially the women, depart, they would call out, "Good-by, Professor" to their exiting teachers. Some professors would not deign to answer them or even acknowledge them. Some of the professors seemed to cultivate and enjoy the divide between professors and students.

Claire was puzzled when in her home stays she found the fathers were usually middle aged, sometimes 50, but their wives were much younger, 20 or 30. This was so common in Syria that it seemed to me to be the norm, which I attributed to the problem of the bride price.

All the Coe students were remarkably attractive, and this was not lost on the Syrian students. Claire received a love letter written in quite good English. There were a lot of soulful looks, too. The Syrian students had noticed the attraction between Matt and Jennifer, an attraction of which Matt, at least, seemed to be unaware. Often they were asked when they were going to get married. All three Coe students were planning graduate school after their Coe graduation, so marriage was not much on their minds. But of course, they weren't immune to romance, as we

saw on the day I had planned a trip for the Coe group to The Church of Saint Simeon, a designated United Nations World Site.

With Samer, the young assistant to the Director of the Aleppo Museum, as our guide and resource, we were enjoying the lovely ruins of the ancient religious complex. One of the world's oldest surviving religious sites, it was founded by a dedicated Christian monk, Simeon Stylites (390-459), who had left his monastery because he was determined to subject himself to ever harsher austerities. Determined to escape the crowds who pestered him with questions and requests for advice, he took up living on top of a pole. (Pole sitting became popular during the early centuries of Christianity). His first pole was only three meters high, but he gradually found he needed more distance, and his perch was eventually elevated to 18 meters. From atop his pole he gave sermons twice a day, and many pilgrims came, some from as far away as Britain. To accommodate the crowds, a four basilica church was built with an octagonal courtyard at the center and the pole in the center of the courtyard. Over the courtyard, there was a dome. The south exterior of the main basilica was still standing. The saint's pole was now only a few meters high, because over the years pilgrims had chipped off relics. Although a stone wall had been constructed around the complex, it had suffered during a series of wars, beginning when it was conquered by Arab armies in the Arab-Byzantine War of the 600s.

Samer's explanations were perhaps too extensive, for Jennifer and Matt escaped and hid out behind a row of tombs. I do not know what they said to each other, but when they emerged, they were holding hands and their eyes were shining with a special light. Everyone recognized that both now knew what many of us had seen earlier. A few Syrian students witnessed a modest American courtship unlike the sexual abandon in the western films shown in Syria and also unlike the restricted practices in Syria.

Dr. Marrs, Claire, Jennifer and Matthew went on to make presentations to the other two universities in Syria as well, at Homs, and Damascus. The faculties at the four universities showed little interest in the idea of a writing center featuring student collaboration, and only a few individuals seemed at all receptive. I think it's fair to say that everywhere the Syrian students responded well to the Americans, even though sometimes, not unlike students at Coe, they wished for quick and easy ways to improve their spelling and punctuation, so as to please their teachers. In the 1990s, writing centers and student collaboration were relatively new in the United States, too, and many American professors then thought that good writing meant essentially conformity to standard usage. It's hard to change such ideas everywhere, but especially hard in a didactic society like Syria's. How much the Coe group was able to facilitate a different approach to writing remains unknown. What we do know is when students from different cultures meet, common ground and friendships are established. What would happen if diplomacy world-wide included such exchanges between students.

The Position of Women in the Middle East

As a woman from Iowa who became a poet, mother of four, college professor, and grandmother before arriving in Syria, I have always faced resistance to my life choices, resistance built into an American culture that remains ambivalent about women. My home region of Northwest Iowa in my childhood and still today remains largely skeptical of intellectuals and artists and frowns especially upon women who pursue such "elitist" careers as mine.

As a female child drawn to reading and writing, I was fortunate to win the support of people who helped me find my way into a larger and freer world, but even in that comparative freedom there were restraints. I join my fellow Americans in rejoicing that American law today generally supports the fundamental idea that women and men are equal before the law. But even as I write these words, I remember vividly how the nation has failed to add to our Constitution language affirming this equality. Throughout my life as I struggled to gain the recognition for my accomplishments that a man in my place would receive, to gain equal pay for my work, to progress in my profession while also raising my children, I have been acutely aware not only that supportive laws may not solve systemic problems and that a regressive government could, in the absence of constitutional protection, take away any of the legal freedoms women have won.

Indeed, as I write today (in 2022), long years of relative reproductive freedom in the U.S. have ended with a Supreme Court decision. It should be no surprise, then, that I went to Syria as an ardent feminist. Nor should it surprise anyone that I was increasingly appalled as I began to understand more and more clearly the actual experiences of women in the ancient patriarchy of the Middle East. I have recounted some of the struggles of young Syrians in navigating the rules of courtship. The next section tells my more memorable experiences of women's situation in Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East.

A Woman's Place

The position of women in Syria was far different from women's place in the United States. First, the laws concerning women and inheritance were shockingly different. Secondly, an unmarried women or girl had to obey her father, and when she married, her husband made almost all her decisions. Third, women's positions were further complicated by the law that allowed men to marry as many as four wives simultaneously. As a result, women's lives were very restricted in comparison to the U.S.

Syria in 1996-98 was far more liberal than many of the Arab states, but the laws of inheritance, based on the Quran, were virtually the same as in the more conservative Arab nations. I learned that a woman could inherit only 1/8th of her husband's estate when he died. The sons were allotted the remainder, and the oldest son became the head of the family and made the family's major decisions. According to tradition, the oldest son was supposed to take care of his widowed mother for the rest of her life. A wife who was not Muslim could inherit nothing. In the event that the woman had no son, the sons' share went to the father's brothers. Our divorced neighbor, Zeena, told me that her mother had no sons, so her father's money went to his brothers; her uncles, therefore, were very good to take care of her.

In 1996 the international community in Aleppo was abuzz because of the plight of a German woman who had married a local doctor. He died early and suddenly, leaving his widow with a twenty-one-year old son and a daughter just graduating from high school. The daughter wanted to go to college in Germany, but the son would not allow it. The mother had not converted to Islam, so she could inherit nothing. Her son didn't take care of her, but she was able to survive by getting a job that paid very little, teaching German at the International Language Institute.

This problem of inheritance led wives to be desperate for sons, to provide for them should they be widowed. In a country where there was no social security, a son was her lifeline to a secure old age. This helped explain all those Muslim women we had seen putting supplications for sons through the bars surrounding John the Baptist's tomb in the Grand Mosque in Damascus.

One day in the bus on the way to Damascus, Mel and I sat opposite a family with four beautiful teen-age girls. They spoke some English, and when I complimented the mother on four such lovely girls, she lamented that she had "only girls," although the girls were so good looking, and obviously lively, in good spirits, and good health. I thought her a lucky woman, but not in Syria, where she must bemoan the fate that had given her only daughters.

We learned a number of the unwritten rules governing the conduct of women. In many homes, a woman or girl must always be accompanied by a man when outside her door. My female graduate students, who sometimes came to my flat for help writing their papers, were always driven there by a brother. Sometimes I couldn't tell whether the rule was law or custom. Zeena, our divorced downstairs neighbor, said that no woman could get a passport without her father's permission. Neither could she get a post office box.

Traditionalists in Syria confined women to two duties: keep the house and bear many children. In most families, the men did all the shopping, including the grocery shopping. It was not uncommon to see men in women's clothing stores, picking out their wives' clothing. I remember how put-out my French friend, Marie, was when we watched a man choose some provocative undergarments in one clothing store. "That poor woman will have to wear those," Marie said.

In the stricter traditional families, a girl's father decided whom she would marry, and sometimes children were engaged in infancy. President al-Assad had aroused traditionalist anger when he decreed that both boys and girls would go to school together. This was especially shocking because the older traditionalists knew well that if young college students mixed in classes, some of them would fall in love. A woman was *supposed* to fall in love *after* she was married. Al-Assad's new rule upset centuries of male power to determine relationships inside the family and between families. When Mel and I arrived in Syria, the traditional ways were fading, but they were not gone.

If some women chafed under this system of restrictions, they were reminded how much more liberal Syria was than it had been — and how much more liberal than many of the Arab countries. Syrian women could go to the university and become doctors, pharmacists, or engineers. There were women in the Syrian Legislature.

As an American, I saw the advances that had been made, but it seemed to me, that these were baby steps. Much more was needed before Syrian women were really free to achieve their potential.

Getting to know Callie

Unlike most Syrian girls, Callie had blond hair and green eyes. She dressed like an American coed, wearing jeans and a sweater. She was an anomaly in many ways that were shocking to the traditional society. She had her own car, a used white station wagon, that had previously belonged to the Mukhabarat security agency. I never knew another Syrian girl who had a car. Most *men* didn't own cars. She was one of the best students in the graduate class, and she loved American literature. She told me her favorite book was *Gone with the Wind*. The first year we were there 1996-97, Mel and I could not accept her invitation to visit her family, because I thought it unwise to visit the home of a student who was in my class. I wanted to be very sure students could not think I was favoring someone.

Our second year in Syria, Callie had finished her American Literature Master's Degree and was staying on to study for another in British Literature, so Mel and I accepted her invitation to spend a weekend with her family in Hama. First she gave us a quick driving tour of the town. Then she took us to visit an elderly American woman, who had married a local man years before. She greeted us warmly, but then she mainly sat in front of her tank of tropical fish, struggling to remember her English.

At home, Callie pointed out the apartment house across the road from her parents' place. "There are three flats there for when we get married, one for my older brother who is working in Saudi now, one for my younger brother who is at the university, but not studying much — I hope you'll talk to him, Mr. Mel — and one for me when I get married." She laughed. "My grandmother is always pressuring me to get married."

"What do you say to that?" Mel asked.

"She wants me to marry my cousin."

It was common for cousins to marry. We had asked Dr. Mary Anna Gregorian, the pediatrician, if this led to many birth defects. To our surprise, she said she had expected to see many in her training, but this hadn't turned out to be the case. She thought perhaps she saw a few more cleft palates than would be average elsewhere.

"I'll never marry my cousin," Callie said emphatically.

Callie's father was a doctor who had married a blond German woman when he was studying medicine there. They both spoke some English and were anxious to make us feel at home.

In her room she had pictures of screen idols pinned to the walls. It always surprises me to be reminded that serious graduate students had been foolish teen-agers not long ago. She also showed us an elaborate photograph album of her engagement party. She had once been engaged to Abdullah, a young man from a very rich and influential family. The many pictures of the party showed Callie in a beautiful blue formal dress surrounded by girlfriends, and others showed her in the midst of aunts, uncles, cousins, her brothers with their friend from Saudi Arabia, and the insistent grandmother. There were two shots of her and the grandmother together without the entourage. Some of the pictures showed a handsome young man.

"Yes," Callie said, "his family was upset when I broke the engagement."

"Why did you break it off?" I asked.

"There was no magic," she said. "I didn't love him."

"I thought the traditional script was a couple fell in love after they were married."

"That's supposed to be the story. But I didn't see how that could happen with him and me."

I remembered she told me earlier her favorite American novel featured a torrid romance. I wondered if she thought love had to be Scarlet O'Hara and Rhett Butler? Or was the young man

not a good match for this ambitious, talented, would-be-modern woman?

"While you were engaged, did you get to know him well?"

"That was the problem," she said. "When I asked him who was his favorite author, he couldn't think of anyone. When I asked him to tell me his favorite story or character, he just laughed and said he would leave that to me."

"Perhaps you could have introduced him to the pleasures of literature," I said.

"He dropped out of the university. He told me he didn't like to read."

I suspected Callie's family was an important one in Syria, and when I heard this boy's name, I began to guess this marriage would have been a melding of two powerful tribes. Probably this broken engagement was a political problem as well as a personal problem for the young people.

"Was Abdullah very disappointed?"

"His family might have been, but I think he wasn't. I saw him studying all my girlfriends at the engagement party. My brother had seen him at the Shams Hotel with two beautiful girls, one on each arm."

After the engagement party pictures, she showed us photos of her brother and his best friend and workmate, also an engineer in Saudi Arabia, and of her younger brother, who attended the University of Damascus. Even in her liberal family, sons were the favored children, and daughters had to navigate traditional restrictions.

The next day Callie took us to the local largest mosque. Like all mosques, it had beautiful carpets covering the floor. Among them were two enormous Nain carpets that Margo would have loved. She had bought a smaller Nain for their flat. We also went to view the famous waterwheels of Hama. We had seen a model in the Christmas diorama in Damascus. These wooden norias were built in Roman times for irrigation of the fields of wheat that still encircled Hama. The biggest was fifteen feet tall, with cup-like paddles to scoop water from the Orontes River. Adjacent were three smaller ones. They stood on wooden blocks that rested on stone piers. In the past, similar waterwheels along ditches kept water flowing to the fields. They droned as they turned, as if the wood were objecting to the use to which it had been put. Again we could feel the proximity of the deep past so common in Syria: the Egyptians, the Assyrians, the Hittites, the Byzantines, the Romans, the Crusaders, the Muslim invaders. Many of the ancient structures and artifacts are gone, but a few remain. Here was another example of ancient Rome's famed engineering still at work, still creaking and squeaking, the voice of machinery toiling. After centuries, it still delights.

In the middle of Hama, we noticed a lot of construction around what appeared to be a new park. Callie said nothing about the bombing of Hama in 1992, when President Hafiz al-Assad sent his brother, Rafaat al-Assad, and the air force to bomb the quarters of the city where the Muslim Brotherhood had their headquarters and where many supporters lived. The bombing had destroyed a large area in the middle of the city. Mel and I had agreed between us we would discuss this subject only if Callie or her parents brought it up. We did not want to get involved in the internal politics of Syria.

A few days after returning from our visit, I saw Callie in the library.

"I'm looking for a copy of Hemingway's "Hills like White Elephants." I said. "I want to quote from a passage in it that illuminates a passage from another text which the students are reading. I can't find it here. This weekend Mr. Petro and Mrs. Anil are driving us to Damascus, where I hope to find a copy at the American Center."

Callie's eyes lighted up. "Could I ride along?" she asked. "My best girlfriend from the fourth-year classes has been dying to see me."

"I'll ask Mrs. Anil," I said. "Would it be all right with your parents?"

"It'll be all right. They think you're a good chaperone."

So on Friday afternoon Mel and I and Callie were on our way to Damascus. We had arranged to stay at a hotel, and booked a room next to ours for Callie. After dropping off our luggage, Callie wanted to go to her friend's flat. "I will have dinner with them," she said.

"Be sure to return here by ten o'clock," I said. "I go to bed early, and you must not keep me up just because you have so much girl talk to catch up on."

She promised, and I set out to find a copy of Hemingway's short stories.

About ten o'clock I knocked on Callie's door. No answer. I sighed, but I knew young people had a hard time meeting deadlines — and she was probably running on Syrian time. I decided to wait in the lobby. I took the book along to read while I waited. Eleven o'clock. Twelve o'clock. I was too tired, so I went up to our room and went to sleep beside Mel. I wished we weren't such good chaperones.

The next morning she met us in the lobby. I thought she treated us badly by not coming back at a reasonable hour. Where was she? What was she doing? She said she had had dinner with her friend and her new husband, and they had talked and talked and forgot about the time. It seemed very unreasonable to me. The next day we all returned to Aleppo. It was apparent Callie had not been honest with me, and this disturbed me. I was on Callie's side and wanted to help her achieve the freedom enjoyed by American women, but her

parents had trusted me. Whatever she had done that night in Damascus remained a secret.

Before we parted I told her: "Callie, I won't tell your parents about the Friday night you disappeared in Damascus, but if they ask me, I won't tell any lies for you." I liked her and wished her well, but I was wary now. I did not like being used.

Later in Aleppo, we asked Mahmoud about Callie. He laughed. "The students say that on exam day she writes answers on her thigh, and during the exam, pulls up her skirt to look at the answers." It was hard to know if this rumor was believable. Callie was rich, beautiful, and very intelligent. Those were three reasons for jealousy, resentment and spreading such scandal.

"There is also something about a Saudi," Mahmoud said.

I thought nothing more of it. Syrians, like Americans, seemed to thrive on rumors, many of which I thought preposterous. Once, a professor told me England's Princess Diana had been killed by the British secret service to prevent her from marrying Dodi Fayed, a Muslim.

Callie Receives a Proposal

"Dr. Ann," Callie said over the phone. "Could you and Mr. Mel go with me to have lunch at the Sheraton." As we had no classes, I was glad to consent.

"We're going to have lunch with Mr. Nasser. He's an old friend of my uncle's. So I have to go." I remembered him. A middle-aged man, he was a major exporter to Saudi Arabia of vegetables grown in Syrian plastic hothouses. We had met him at one of Mr. Gregorian's parties. He had been very friendly, very interested in the United States, and he had then insisted that we must soon get together again.

The Aleppo Sheraton had a fountain in the lobby, but otherwise, it might have been a Western hotel in any city in the world. We had been there only once before. It was pricey by Aleppo's standards, and we had found so many really great local eateries. Moreover, I liked to cook, so most of the time we ate at home.

A few weeks previous, we had viewed in the Sheraton's conference room an exhibit of paintings by local artists. These were mostly watercolors and a few oils. The subjects were primarily landscapes, with a few cityscapes, and there were a few excellent examples of calligraphy. No people or animals appeared in the paintings. The artists were working within the traditional restrictions of Islam which forbid the depiction of people or animals (except in art for the court), and it would be a terrible sin to depict Mohammed. However, the times were changing. A local artist, Subonni, had studied water color in Paris. Although he painted many of the beautiful buildings in Aleppo, he included trees, and was even so bold as to paint local people. The restrictions were disappointing to me because several of the landscapes were delightful. I was thinking of the British and French painters of seventeenth century. It seemed to me that these outdoor scenes needed a young girl in a pretty dress or a little stream with cream-colored cows grazing beside it. I noted as well that there were no examples of modern abstractions. I looked again more closely at the calligraphy and realized that I would have to learn a lot more about it. I began to see that my Western art education had not prepared me to fully appreciate what I saw here. Syria was stretching my understanding.

When we arrived at the Sheraton dining room with Callie, Mr. Nasser was already seated. He jumped up when he saw us and rushed to pull out a chair for Callie next to his. When the waiter came around, Mr. Nasser insisted that we must all choose anything we wanted from the extensive menu. Callie took a long time looking it over.

"Beautiful," Mr. Nasser said, watching her.

We agreed. She was a beautiful girl. "She is one of my best students," I told him.

"Of course. She's very clever. She is everything." He sighed and went on, "You do things different in America."

"Many things are different in America," Mel agreed.

"If only some things could change here."

"What would you change if you could?" Mel asked.

I touched Mel's hand under the tablecloth. I hoped that the conversation would not turn to politics. With very good friends, we laughed at the jokes about the al-Assad government, but I knew nothing about Mr. Nasser's political affiliations, and I was determined to say nothing against the government to a virtual stranger. I thought a good deal about Syria's government and social structure, and Mel and I often talked about these things in the privacy of our own flat at night. Only with Mr. Nasser's next remark did I realize that it was not al-Assad's dictatorship that Mr. Nasser wanted to talk about and that perhaps I should not have praised Callie's intellect.

"I am lonely. I have no one to talk with at home. My wife is not clever." He glanced at Callie. "Our fathers arranged our marriage."

Callie looked up then and redirected the conversation. "We should have the rack of lamb — a big one, enough for all of us."

"Of course," Mr. Nasser said and motioned for the waiter, who warned him that this would take some time. "We have time," Mr. Nasser said, "I'm happy to be with my good friends." He smiled at all of us. I was surprised to have risen so in his esteem — good friends, indeed!

We sipped orange juice while the mezze came — the exquisite little plates of typical Syrian foods, hummus, pita, radishes, parsley, yogurt, small stuffed tomatoes, little meat balls, so many things. Callie was hungry, and she ate as much as Mel.

Mr. Nasser sighed and repeated, "My wife is not clever."

Mel laughed and said, "My wife is clever." We all laughed, but Mr. Nasser was not to be diverted.

"She does not love me. She never loved me. I never loved her. It was all arranged for us when we were children."

We saw clearly now why Callie would not have come to lunch without us. His situation was not unusual. Some families made the marriage arrangements for their children while they were still babies, often consolidating family ties when cousins married cousins.

"We haven't had relations for three years," Mr. Nasser said sadly. "Many men would take a second wife."

Callie would never be a second wife, I was sure. She would not even be a first wife to this middle-aged man. She liked the handsome men at the university. Any one of them would marry her. She had been engaged once to a man from a rich family. She would choose her own husband when she was ready.

Callie was taking small bites of hummus and pita. She didn't look up. Mel and I were at a loss, and were relieved when the rack of lamb Callie had ordered appeared in front of her. She picked up the knife that came with it and began cutting off slices for each of us.

"Look, how she cuts it so precisely," Mr. Nasser said. "My wife cuts it the wrong way."

"Eat," Callie said, "while it's hot."

I was glad to begin eating the lamb — cooked enough, but still pink, perfect. I too was glad to change the subject.

Mr. Nasser said, "The chef here knows how to cook lamb right."

"How is the export business?" Mel asked.

"Thank you, Mel!" I silently sighed.

"The tomato crop is coming in late," Mr. Nasser said.

Callie and I were cutting off bits of the meat to enjoy with the buttered rice topped with pistachio nuts and the asparagus tips.

Mel managed to keep Mr. Nasser talking about business, and whenever there was a pause, I jumped in, having heard enough about his marital troubles.

"From the plane, we saw the green circles the Saudi's water pumps were making in the desert," I said. "Will they be able to grow their own vegetables?"

"Only if their aquafers hold out," Mr. Nasser replied.

After the lamb, Callie looked over the now empty table. "Dr. Ann and Mr. Mel love baklava. Let's order a large one." Baklava, with pastry as delicate and thin as silk, was filled with honey and walnuts. We agreed it was one of the greatest desserts in the world.

Mr. Nasser watched Callie eat her portion, smiling at her. She concentrated on the pastry.

"Nothing for three years," he returned to his lament. We remained silent.

"I have to get back," Callie said. "My father said he would call me at four."

We gladly grasped at this good excuse to leave. Perhaps Callie's father would call. Perhaps he wouldn't, but we were anxious to escape further awkward conversation. Mr. Nasser did not know how to be subtle, or perhaps because of his wealth and status he may have thought he didn't have to be.

Mel and I thanked him for the lunch; Mr. Nasser said he would call us again.

On the way home, Callie thanked us for chaperoning her. "Second wife!" she sniffed.

Callie's Crisis

During our time in Aleppo, the political situation seemed to deteriorate. The students in the Armenian Club said that government regulations were becoming stricter. The young man with the photography shop said that the Mukhabarat was looking at all the pictures that he developed, coming in every day to check. The young man operating a beauty shop said that the police wanted a list of all his clients. Was the Muslim Brotherhood coming back to life? Was there a new threat from Turkey? Had there been an assassination attempt on President al-Assad? There was a rumor that every night he slept in a different room in a vast underground complex. Syria was rife with political rumors, many of them as fanciful as Syria's fairy tales. At the university more and more often students asked me how they could get a visa to go to the United States.

Among those looking for a way out of Syria was Callie. From the beginning, she had not disguised her wish to leave Syria, to escape its restrictions on women. Having completed one Master's Degree, Callie was trying even harder to get out of Syria. She applied for a special grant to go to the United States.

"Will your father let you go?" I asked.

"Only if I can arrange to live with a family," she said, "and if I get the grant."

She had done what she could. She completed a complicated and extensive questionnaire, and she wrote a good essay to qualify for this special grant. I hoped she would be chosen. More than anything else in the world, she wanted to go to the United States and become an American.

One day Gillian phoned me about the grant for Callie. "I think we have to help get her out of Syria. She showed me bruises on her chest where her father beat her." This seemed strange and unlikely to me. Her father seemed like a pleasant, mild man. But so much in Syria was not what it seemed. Was it possible he was trying to be a traditional Syrian father and keep a daughter in line? Were other relatives pressuring him? We had recently read reports of honor killings of young women in nearby Jordan. Young women suspected of illicit sexual encounters had been murdered. I, too, worried about Callie.

One evening Callie appeared at our door. "Dr. Ann, Mr. Mel," she said breathlessly, "Can I stay at your house tonight?" That request began what seemed to be a bad dream. Sometimes I believe it really was a bad dream.

"What's wrong?"

"The family of my former fiancé are in Aleppo," she sobbed. "They hate me." Her voice was shaking.

"Are you in danger?" Mel asked

"They want revenge because I rejected their relative. Now they're spreading lies about me. They will do anything."

"I think we should call Gillian," Mel said.

Gillian voiced alarm at this development. We did not know anything about Callie's former fiancé's family, but the diplomats knew the powerful Syrian families, who was related to whom and who had political influence. We all knew what doing "anything" could mean. Without warning, the Mukhabarat could arrest and jail anyone at any time. Syrian jails were notorious for torture. Everyone believed that they killed prisoners and that they could make anyone disappear.

When we had returned to Syria in September 1997, Gillian had given us and all the Junior Fulbrights a code to indicate when we were in danger, just in case.

On the phone Mel said, "McDonald's ice cream."

"Chocolate cone," Gillian replied. That meant that we had to leave for Damascus immediately.

I tried to make casual conversation with Callie while Mel set out to walk the six blocks to Mat and Margo's flat, to borrow their car. We couldn't use the phone, which we knew was tapped.

Callie chewed her finger nails. I slipped down the stairs to Zeena's flat and asked her to loan me two *abayahs* and two *hijabs*. She looked at my stricken face, and without asking any questions, took them from her closet and handed them to me. A long half hour went by, while I busied myself putting together a suitcase of things we would need overnight. Mat's car pulled up before our flat, and we hurried to get in. Within seconds we were on the highway to Damascus.

"Can't we take some back roads?" I asked.

"I couldn't find the way in the dark — and we can't read the Arabic road signs, anyway." Soon we noticed a white station wagon following us, one of the white station wagons of the Mukhabarat. It kept a distance behind us, but was never out of sight. Callie cried a little.

To ease the tension, I said in desperation, "Let's sing." For years when traveling with our children on long car trips, we had occupied them with songs. Mel began one of the children's favorites, "Old McDonald Had a Farm." Callie joined in with the chorus, helping us all make barking, clucking, and mooing sounds.

"Can't we go faster?"

"Yes," Mel replied, "but they can go faster than we can. I'm trying to keep us looking as normal as possible." But this clearly wasn't normal. There was almost no traffic on the road in this dark, moonless night. In Syria there are no streetlights. We could see nothing of the villages we passed. I held my breath every time we had to stop at one of the guard houses along the route. Callie and I pulled the scarf end of our hijabs over our faces, and I closed my Western eyes in obedience to the strict injunction not look at any man who looked at us. "Covered" women were granted every respect, their covering symbolic of their piety and proof that they were the best exemplars of Muslim womanhood. The soldiers peered into the windows, saw a man driving with two covered women in the back, and they waved us on. The white car followed.

"They could try to run us off the road." Callie said. "Or force us into a ditch."

As we crept seemingly without progress through the moonless dark, Mel kept up our spirits by proposing more songs: "You are My Sunshine," "She'll be Coming Round the Mountain," "My Darling Clementine," and all the songs we could remember. We taught Callie "Yankee Doodle." Finally, Callie proposed the current hit in Aleppo, "*Habibi (Beloved)*."

"Oh, not again!" I thought. We were so tired of that one blaring from too loud speakers on the streets, but we could sing it, and we did.

I wished I could sit in front beside Mel, so I could reach over and touch his hand. But a covered Muslim woman would be properly in the back seat. How had we come to be on this strange nightmare journey on the long, dark road to Damascus?

After we finally fell silent, I asked, "What are you thinking, Mel?"

Then it came to me that our situation was so ludicrous that despite its seriousness, I almost laughed aloud. Here we were, two naïfs from Iowa caught up in a thriller like Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*. We weren't Smiley or his people. We weren't 007. We had no training for this, no clue. We were making it up as we went along.

The brief impulse to laugh suggested an idea. Perhaps Mel could tell some of his dumb kid jokes! I silently corrected myself, not dumb kids, but dumb jokes. Mel was famous with our children and grandchildren for this, and I always groaned when he began one. But tonight I could bear even those old bromides. Anything to take our minds off the car behind us and the unknown for Callie ahead.

"A teacher asked her students to use the word 'beans' in a sentence. One child said, 'My father grows beans.' Another said, 'My mother cooks beans.' Finally the class clown said, 'we are all human beans'."

Callie chuckled. I forced a laugh. Mel laughed a real laugh. He could rise to any occasion, even a car chase in a foreign country, followed by Mukhabarat thugs. "We might as well laugh," he said. "I'm thinking those guys behind us are probably more scared than we are."

"How could that be?" I said.

"If they were supposed to keep track of Callie, they've goofed. Their bosses will not be happy with them."

I thought about the security guards who came regularly to lean with put-on casualness, against the doors to our apartment house. They looked as if they were capable of anything. They might try something desperate, but I didn't want to scare Callie, who was curled up in a ball of misery. She tried to weep silently, but from time to time I could hear a muffled sob. She was so young, too young to have to deal with political intrigue.

I also was too young for this, and I thought to myself, "I am sixty-eight years old, yet still a baby from an Iowa farm, trying to make sense of, and trying to work within or against a system thousands of years old, one that, beneath all the pretenses to the contrary, despises women and treats them as pawns in political games. On this night, all the evil genies of Syria seemed to be working against us. I was feeling very sorry for myself and very worried.

The lights of the white car seemed to float behind us, a white balloon tied to our bumper with its menacing dark basket.

"There's too much silence," Mel said. "Let's tell more jokes."

No groan from me on this night.

His corny jokes sustained us to the outskirts of Damascus, and then through the silent city. Would the goons in the white car do something desperate before we could arrive at the American Center? Bond — James Bond — would have more sophisticated tools and methods at his disposal than corny jokes and singing old songs as he evaded his pursuers. But this was not a movie. We were amateurs.

As we turned into the familiar street of the American Center, the white car turned and was lost in the dark. I breathed a little easier. I think they didn't want to have any trouble with American diplomats. Or maybe they were going to headquarters for more directions.

"They've left," I croaked. We all laughed, the hysterical laughter of relief. Still, we got out of the car carefully, keeping watch — would they turn around and come back? The door of the American Center cracked open, and Gillian hurried out.

"Please, act casual," she whispered.

Inside she hustled Callie upstairs to the room with the folded rope escape ladder. She handed Callie a ticket and an envelope with addresses in New York for the grant she had won.

"The driver is waiting below for you. He'll take you to the airport. Good luck!"

Callie kissed all of us goodbye, and grasping the sides of the rope ladder, she climbed down into the dark night.

Before we left Iowa, we could not have guessed we would ever be involved in what we assumed was an affair between a student and a secret service branch over a suspected forbidden romance or a failed engagement. We never knew the full, real story. Perhaps this adventure was part of a larger political struggle or of some long-standing feud we didn't know about. Or maybe, security was just keeping an eye on us, to see where we went.

Cultural Ambassador

Saudi Arabia

It was not unusual for Fulbright Professors to give lectures and programs at other universities in their host countries and even to visit universities in nearby nations. I learned that I could apply to lecture in other countries, with official permission from the Fulbright committee for Syria. In 1998, Saudi Arabia was closed to most foreigners except for those needed for the oil industry. I decided to apply to lecture in Saudi Arabia. Diplomats at the American Center in Damascus, eager to send me there as an official guest, consulted with a diplomat friend in Riyadh, who had wanted a Fulbright to come. She arranged for me to lecture at the Women's University in Riyadh, a branch of King Saud University, the only university for women. The Saudi government would never consider a woman professor speaking at a men's university. Because I was interested in women's lives, as were the American diplomats, they arranged a women's gathering in the American Consulate at Dhahran, and a meeting with some local woman writers in Riyadh. Because such meetings were revolutionary for Saudi women, who were severely restricted, the American diplomats didn't know whether Saudi women would be allowed to attend, or even if they would attend if allowed.

Emily Dickinson at Dharan

At the university, I planned to speak about the poetry of Marianne Moore, but when I arrived at the diplomat's home, she told me the university professors wanted me to talk about Emily Dickinson. I hadn't brought any of Dickinson's poems with me, but the university sent a volume of her collected poems over to the house. An admirer of Dickinson, I was glad to talk about her, but the notice was short, and I would have liked more time to prepare.

The American embassy van took me and my accompanying American diplomats everywhere. Because of the June 1996 bombing of the American soldiers' barracks at Dharan, the embassy remained on high alert. (Perhaps in that country, it was necessary always to be on high alert.) Our van had bullet-proof windows. I thought that must mean the embassy believed we really needed them, and felt less safe as a result. To enter the embassy grounds, the van stopped before high cement barriers, and attendants emerged with detectors to search under the car for possible bombs. Why had I tried so hard to come here?

When we arrived at the Women's University on the day of my lecture, we were stopped before a pair of huge, locked doors. The chair of the English Department opened the doors for us, and after we entered, she carefully locked the doors again. She explained that they kept all the young women very safe. Locked in, they could not leave except with a male family member. I had read about a fire in a girls' school in another part of the country. The girls crowded at the gates, screaming to escape, but the male gate keepers would not open up, knowing the girls had fled from their rooms in their night clothes without their *hijabs* and *abayahs*. They could not be seen without them. Many died, but the men had saved them from the worse fate, becoming improper.

To explain Dickinson's background, I emphasized her reliance on the form of Christian hymns she had grown up with, and to explain some of her views, I explained her family's theology of the Trinity, a core Christian belief, and Emily's rejection of it. I believed the Muslim students would find this perspective interesting. Because a number of the women in the audience were working on advanced degrees, I thought it important to respond to their questions, so I allowed time for that. I hoped they would be more forthcoming than the students in my undergraduate classes at the University of Aleppo. I learned that though they had been studying Dickinson's poetry, they had not heard about the rebelliousness that is reflected in many of her poems.

A Ph.D. Oral Exam

After the lecture and question period, the English Department Chair asked if I would like to stay and listen to one young woman's defense of her Ph.D. dissertation on the poetry of American-born British author T. S. Eliot (1888-1965). I wish there had been time for me to hear all of it.

Because men and women who aren't related cannot occupy the same room, the examination took place in the TV room of the women's university. A TV camera was set up facing the candidate. A flock of her friends occupied chairs just out of the camera's view. I saw her committee on the screen, five men gathered on the main campus of King Saud University. Among them I failed to find a sympathetic face. After the Ph.D. candidate was introduced, one member of the examining committee began to speak. After a long analysis of Eliot's poetry, he came finally to his question. I could not see a clear relationship between his little lecture and his question. I hoped this young woman could find a way to respond. The oral examination for a Ph.D. can be a traumatic experience anywhere. I saw that she

was shaking with fear, and my heart went out to her.

Another committee member began to ask a question, but the first interrupted with further extended comments and another question. The poor candidate didn't know which question to answer. The group of students with her shifted in their chairs. One of them whispered an answer to her.

Before she could speak, the lead examiner commenced his third diatribe. All of her supporters began to whisper to her. Finally, the other members of the committee came to life and began asking questions, but still without giving the girl a break to answer. These officious men were apparently debating with each other and not interested in what she could say. Her friends continued whispering, and I wished I could whisper, too, offering her any sort of help. I, at least, was rescued by the English chairman, who brought a summons to the waiting embassy van. I never learned how the woman's defense came out. I hoped they passed her. She deserved it, if only for enduring the ordeal I had seen.

Wives in Dharan

The next day I rode with the diplomats to Dhahran, where in 1996 the Khobar Towers, an American Air Force Barracks, had been bombed, killing 19 American airmen. The American Consul in Dharan told me he had sent out official invitations to the wives of several important officials and community leaders to join his wife and me at their home the next night. I would talk about American Literature and read poems from my new book, *The Alcott Family Arrives*. The poems are biographical, about the lives of Louisa May Alcott and her family, as well as other American writers of the 19th century. The consul told me that the day the invitations were delivered his phone rang and rang. The women asked, "You mean the husbands are invited?"

"No," his secretary said, "the wives are invited."

"Then you mean Mr. and Mrs.?"

"No," the secretary told them. "This is for women."

Then the consul explained. "None of these wives has ever been out without their husbands. It was revolutionary for them."

"Will they all come?"

"We are hoping for the best."

The next night eleven women showed up at the consul's residence. All wore expensive, fashionable dresses beneath their black *abayahs*, which they all abandoned once it was obvious no men were present. Then they relaxed, and the consul's wife, who spoke excellent Arabic, made them at home and introduced me.

We had an interpreter, because only a few of the women spoke some English. We wanted them to understand as much as possible. After the reading we were served a delicious dessert and coffee. One of the women presented me with a beautiful stole, of very light weight wool, embroidered with lovely designs in shades of green and coral. At the end of the evening, they went out laughing to their waiting chauffeurs in their luxurious European cars. They were happy with this sliver of freedom they had experienced. The consul, who had discretely kept to his den, arranged with me to have the publisher send him copies of *The Alcott Family Arrives.* The U.S. Government would give one to each of the women present. I wished I had thought of that before I came.

Visiting about my work in Aleppo, I told the consul and his wife about the arduous problems of living under the dictatorship of Hafez al-Assad. They both smiled.

"I know what you mean," he said. "But I had an appointment that I'll argue was more difficult than yours."

"Okay," I said, "top mine."

"Before I came here," he said, "I was serving in Iraq, then under Saddam Hussein."

"You win," I conceded. Saddam Hussein had a remarkable reputation for cruelty. He had done his best to drain the swamps of the south in Iraq where many Shia Muslims lived, turning their terrain into desert and taking away their means of making a living.

A Writing Workshop in Riyadh

Having arranged for me to meet with a group of local writers, the diplomats had advertised a two-day Writer's Workshop at the American Center in Riyadh. They didn't know what or whom to expect.

Attending the first day was one man along with eight women. When I said I was glad to see a Saudi man in the class, the women told me he was not Saudi, but an Egyptian who was working in Riyadh. I wondered why there were no Saudi men. No male poets in Saudi Arabia? Other forms of writing were more politically acceptable? Or, probably more likely, it was socially improper to be "taught" by a woman. The women twittered. They were excited. All spoke some English, but the embassy had thoughtfully provided an interpreter.

I explained that we would use an exercise from my Coe College poetry writing class. I would give them a topic. We would discuss it briefly and share some ideas, and then they could begin to write. After a while, the Embassy's interpreter would read the poems to the class if they wished. No one would know who had written the poem. I said they could write in English or in Arabic.

I gave them a topic that had elicited many good poems in my classes: "I never told anyone." The attendees gasped, but then they began to scribble in their notebooks. I did not know what these women might dare to write. Their lives had been so private, so severely limited. I was amazed to hear these lines in their poems:

I didn't want to marry the man my father chose.
I didn't want to disappoint the family again.
I didn't want to have another baby.
I was so humiliated that I had another daughter. I was inadequate not to produce a son.
I didn't want to leave the school in Switzerland. I had been free there.
I didn't like Aunt Rima, my father's second wife. I hated her and her fat son.
I was ashamed that Father divorced my mother. What did I do?

So much of the ache of Arabian women came out in these poems. I thought the session had been a big success. I racked my brain to know what to give them for a follow-up exercise. I didn't have anything else as good.

The next day all the students returned except the man. There was so much sorrow and frustration in the women's first poems, that I knew that there probably were women who could not come and were contending with all the problems described. I decided to ask them what a woman did if she was trapped in a situation from which she could see no escape. "Does she commit suicide?" I asked.

"No. The holy Quran forbids it."

"What can she do, then?"

They looked at each other. Then the bravest one said, "She goes mad."

I wondered to myself, "Really?"

But the others all nodded their heads. "One of our fellow writers is on the way," she said. "It is possible to will madness; you can act madness until it's real."

I remembered the short story by American author Paul Bowles (1910-1999) about a man who feigned madness and became mad. That seemed to me a terrible solution, even if the circumstances were unbearable. I realized that this could be the assignment for today. "What might a women do if she has gone mad and can do anything she wants? Of course, this isn't you — this is a narrator for whom anything is possible, even the impossible."

The poems again revealed surprising images and ideas:

"She climbed the highest peak in Switzerland. She will climb in Tibet next year."
"She will listen to the oud played softly just for her."
"She will slap her mother-in-law, and the King will give her a medal for bravery."

I was sorry that this was my last day with the writers of Riyadh. These were exceptional women. They had been educated in a country where many women still had no chance at education. Some of them had been abroad, one had even been in a school abroad. These women had everything except freedom. How different was the life of even a very poor woman in the United States.

The next day, Friday, was a day off work. The diplomats took me to the seaside at Jeddah, where I stayed with the American Consul. Jeddah was reputed the most liberal town in Saudi Arabia. It was free and safe enough that the consul felt confident letting me go out with only their local driver to see the historic sites. Among them was a small grave enclosed by a short white picket fence. "The grave of Mother Eve," the driver told me.

"You mean Eve of the Garden of Paradise?"

He nodded affirmatively. Yes, this was the Eve of my Christian Bible and the Muslim Holy Book, the Quran.

Snorkeling in Riyadh

Later we visited the only beach in the Kingdom where a woman could wear a swimming suit. At that time there were no bikinis. I can imagine what the religious authorities would have said about them. I had been told in advance of this plan, so I brought a suit, and at the beach, they showed me how to snorkel enough to see some of the brilliantly colored fish swimming in those waters. If I had been a certified diver, I could have explored the reefs of the Red Sea, some of the best diving spots in the world.

I had felt so sorry for the women I'd seen several years ago on a very hot day at the beach in Kuwait, another restrictive society. I had watched two women sitting on the sand in their black *abayahs* while their husbands enjoyed the water. They had taken off their shoes and socks to let the little waves wash over their feet, but they could expose no other skin. Saudi Arabia was more rigorously restricted than I had really understood. There seemed little room for women to make their own decisions. They were regulated as if they were dangerous forces, not human beings. Although there is safety for any woman who lives within the limits set for her, there is no room for creativity or even to develop her own talents.

The brightly-dressed fish I enjoyed while snorkeling were free to swim where they wished.

No restrictions, unlike the beautiful women of Saudi Arabia.

Spying in Riyadh

Dr. Hussain, a good friend from the faculty at the University of Aleppo, was a guest teacher that year at the King Saud University. He arranged to meet me at my hotel for dinner while I was in Riyadh. The Syrian government paid for the Syrian professors' Ph.D. study in England in return for teaching in the Syrian university system. The state salary in Syria was not large enough for a professor to live a middleclass life, and the Saudi government paid a great deal more. University of Aleppo faculty naturally wanted to work in Saudi Arabia, but they were allowed to teach abroad only for two years.

The Saudi government sought foreign professors because there weren't enough Saudi Ph.Ds. to staff their universities. Saudi Arabia had been slow to start a general education system. In 1945 King Saud organized an extensive education program for boys. Only in 1964 did the government establish the first school for girls. 1957 saw the beginning of higher education, with the establishment of King Saud University in Riyadh, the first university in all the Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

A student had told me that Dr. Ibrahim, Aleppo's English chair, had once referred to Dr. Hussain as "that peasant," even though calling someone a peasant was actually against the law. Indeed, it was true that Dr. Hussain was poor. I suspect he came from a rural Syrian village. Although a Muslim, he lived in the Christian Quarter with his elderly mother, whom he supported. Mel and I enjoyed talking with him, even though he was a professor of linguistics. I had hated the obligatory linguistics graduate course I was forced to take for my Ph.D. degree. That professor concentrated on pronunciations, and try as I might, I could not get interested in the pronunciation of the Eskimo or the Tibetan languages. Dr. Hussain's approach was very different, centered on deciphering meanings, a subject Mel and I both found fascinating. He accepted our invitations only occasionally, in part because he felt he couldn't reciprocate. It was a matter of social politeness in that society to repay invitations. But, of course, there was the edict of the department chair, acting for the Baath Party, to avoid meeting us in our home.

We met at the hotel, where the American diplomats knew I would be safe, even though I did not wear the *abayah* or the *hijab*. But they cautioned that it was against the law for me to leave the building without a male escort. So, I waited for Dr. Hussain at the reception desk where I would be able to spot him coming through the door. The reception area was filled with older men, all dressed in the traditional *galabeya.*

The longer I waited the more acutely I became aware of how I looked. I was dressed modestly for a Westerner, a long sleeved blouse and a long skirt in muted colors. However, I was also blond, blue-eyed, obviously not an Arab, and I had no attendant. The men looked daggers at me. I literally felt they would have liked to use the daggers sticking in their cummerbunds. The jeweled hilts flashed in the light. These men obviously hated me and all I stood for. I began to shiver slightly. Should I go back to my room and miss my meeting with my old friend? I debated this silently and decided to stay and hoped that Dr. Hussain came quickly. Surely, he would come through that door in a minute or two. I was afraid, but I was determined not to yield to these antagonistic self-important, old men. This was the first time, in all my travels in the world, that I had been afraid.

It seemed a long time before Dr. Hussain arrived, but I'm sure it was fewer than ten minutes. We 'd planned to dine in the main dining room, but the *maître d'hôtel* said we would be served in the garden, because all the dining room tables were full. A waiter showed us out to the garden, which was a large, green grass courtyard, enclosed within the hotel, with 100 small tables around the perimeter. We had just been seated when a young Saudi man came into the garden, and from all the 99 other empty tables, he chose the one beside ours. He opened his newspaper and disappeared behind it.

Knowing who the stranger must be, Dr. Hussain and I telegraphed our understanding to each other, and I proceeded to tell Dr. Hussain the news of Aleppo. "It snowed in Aleppo, the first time in 23 years, and Dr. Hannah's little sons made snow men. Dr. Musa's wife gave birth to their eighth child, Dr. Ibrahim attended a meeting of English Department Chairs at the University in Cairo."

Then I asked about his elderly mother, who had remained behind in Aleppo, and he said one of his uncles had come to stay with her while he was away. He told me about his linguistics classes in Riyadh. We enjoyed sharing the news. Finally, the young man folded the newspaper and left, having ordered nothing. We laughed.

"He thinks I'm a spy," I said, "or a prostitute."

"They're suspicious of everyone," Dr. Hussain told me. "Even of me, although I'm an Arab and a Muslim. Still, I'm a foreigner."

"We should have made up a story for him," I said.

"We could have introduced ourselves to him and asked him to join us," Dr. Hussain said. "What a great opportunity we missed!"

"I could have told him you were my son," I said. Dr. Hussain was younger than I.

"We could have told him you were a movie producer, looking for two young men to play major parts in a new film — me and perhaps him, if he was interested." We laughed as we thought of other preposterous stories we might have used. Still, spying was serious. We knew the Saudi police probably were watching both of us and all foreigners all the time. It was a suspicious society. And it wasn't comfortable.

Returning to Aleppo

To return to Syria, I flew out of Riyadh, with a short layover in Medina, Islam's most holy city. Because I was not a Muslim, I could not deplane, but had to wait on board because only Muslims can enter the city. Soon the plane was full, including six men who wore only large bath towels. At least that was all I could see. I never found out what kind of religious shrine or event they were traveling to see. I confess their mode of undress was disconcerting. An older, gray-haired man took the seat opposite mine, shook out and lit up a cigarette. In those days you couldn't smoke until the flight was underway. The attendant asked him to put it out, but he pointedly ignored her. I didn't understand this reply, but the tone wasn't polite, and he continued to puff away. She returned and pleaded with him, but he was undeterred.

At the Damascus airport, I met in line a man speaking English. He introduced himself, an engineer. Like our landlord, he was a graduate of Purdue University at West Lafayette, Indiana. An official who was directing arrivals asked all of us our destinations, and when I gave him the name of my hotel, he put me in the same cab as the Purdue engineer. He reminisced about his time at Purdue as we drove into the city. We pulled up before a block of flats, and the engineer grabbed his bags, and exited into the arms of three children who hugged and hugged. Strangely, I found myself wondering whether he had another family in Saudi Arabia. I later asked our friend, Mat, about the professionals who spent time in both countries. He had heard of such arrangements. Of course, I probably was just imagining.

Farewell to Aleppo

Despite all the difficulties of living and working abroad, we had been happy in Aleppo. There was the excitement of every day discovering something new — some new ancient and ruined city, some new shop selling things we had never even thought of previously, gorgeous hand woven carpets, edible seeds, men's cloaks with the lamb fleece on the inside, the outside beautifully red-dyed leather, Bedouin tent straps. It was a pleasure to sample the street foods: gyros with creamy yogurt and juicy tomato slices, falafel, hot and crisp from the fryer, and most of all, the rotisserie chicken. The fresh vegetables and fruits were abundant and by American standards, amazingly cheap. When they were in season, we bought Queen Ann cherries, paying only what amounted to seventy-five cents in American money for a kilo. Apricots in season were equally inexpensive.

My teaching had been rewarding as well. Although it was difficult to know what the students really learned, I could see from the eager faces in my classes that a number of the students (some, but not all) had come to love American literature. My approach to teaching, especially teaching writing, had been rejected by many of the faculty, but there were some who were open to considering it. Mel had enjoyed his teaching at ICARDA International School, and had established rapport with many of the students, especially the tennis team.

Still, by the summer of 1998 Mel and I were ready to return to our home on Forest Drive in Cedar Rapids and to our summer hideaway at Spirit Lake, to all our family and friends, and to my teaching at Coe College in Cedar Rapids. I had worked hard, and I was tired. The end of my Fulbright service and of Mel's various volunteer efforts meant breaking up our household in Aleppo, bidding farewell to many friends and colleagues, and in various ways reflecting on our adventures abroad.

We had to gather up and dispose of all the scattered goods of our common life, kitchen, furniture, clothes, etc. Sadly, I could not bring home the lovely Persian rugs I had found, because at that time there was an official embargo on anything made in Iran. Giving away nearly everything proved surprisingly time-consuming.

I was glad to jettison most of our American clothing. There wasn't that much, and we'd worn things until we were tired to looking at them. Hoping I could give some of my clothes to my garage family, I returned to our first neighborhood. But the garage woman was gone. Construction on the house was finished, and the owner's car now occupied the garage. Probably, my friends were in

another garage at another construction site. Finding other poor people to accept our castoffs was not that hard. I asked Arno Gregorian about the poor in the Armenian community, for we had met only their prosperous friends and associates and reasonably well-off members of the Armenian Young Peoples' Club. Arno assured me there were many Armenians who could use our clothing, and he helped me pass things on.

At the end of a Fulbright grant, there are administrative tasks. One of these was serving on a committee to choose the next group of junior Fulbrights to come to Syria. All the applicants were excellent students. Most were young men, but there were a few women. I did what I could to make sure some women were chosen, but I was outvoted. No American women would join the junior Fulbright program in Syria the next year.

Another final task was to evaluate my two years at the university. I was asked to reflect on what I thought I had accomplished. This, of course, is difficult. How can one really know the effects of one's actions? This is hard enough when one looks back upon years of experience in the same job in a long familiar culture, fraught as it is with temptations to self-deception. As I attempted a clear-eyed view of just two years, during a period of disruption and exhaustion in my final days in Syria, I found that I could mainly say what I'd tried to do and what I hoped the results would be. Now I look back after 25 years, during which civil war has torn Syria apart and turned much of my beloved Aleppo into rubble, and I find myself no better able to see beyond my hopes when I departed in 1998.

I hope that my exchanges with students and faculty gave them a clearer, more complex view of the United States and its people. Although I am sure that some of the Aleppo university professors understandably resented me because I was paid more than they were, many became my friends and must have come to see that ordinary Americans were very like them. When the American students came to visit, everyone could see how they were like Syrian students. The Syrian students saw that a truly democratic society produced young people who were encouraged to think for themselves, develop their ideas, and present them effectively in their writing. Those who witnessed the budding romance of two young Americans could thereafter contemplate an easier and freer mode of courtship than what they had to deal with in their own lives. Syrian students would find it harder to believe that the "ugly American" was the norm. I saw that the three Coe College students learned better than to fall for the stereotype of "stupid Arab," and I hope that a few years later, after 11 September 2001, they also resisted the new stereotype of "Arab terrorist."

As I reflected then, I remembered experiences that would inform my future work, especially my Coe College course on Middle Eastern Literature.

I had met several interesting colleagues from beyond the University of Aleppo. A professor from Tishreen University at Latakia gave me a copy of his book on Shakespeare's plays that startled me with his thoughtful and novel approach. A Fulbright Scholar from India gave a lecture at the University of Aleppo that changed my opinions about India's development of nuclear weapons. I met a Syrian professor who was doing research in the United States on the disease of wheat plants, commonly called rust. This research was valuable for both American and Syrian agriculture. Having grown up on an Iowa farm, I was impressed. Such experiences expanded my world, and surely they must broaden all who were lucky enough to participate in Fulbright programs. I could reasonably hope that my work had similar effects, for example my interactions with the Student Baath Party.

In my final reflections, I realized that despite their being a nuisance, the Student Baath Party had given me some pleasure. Dr. Ibrahim had warned me against even appearing to say anything against Islam or the government. Still, I so much wanted to convey some understanding of what it really was like to live in the U.S., in a freer and more open society that I came to appreciate more every day I was in Syria. As I have said, I developed a strategy. For almost every class presentation, I had searched for quotations in American literature texts that would allow me to insert without asserting the things I wanted to communicate about democracy. This was fun. I knew that many citizens of Syria disagreed with the party. I enjoyed believing I was subverting the dictatorship and its tools in plain sight. I knew, too, that I was walking a high-wire. The Baath Party was eagerly seeking the chance to knock me off, and they had so much power. I had to carefully maintain my balance. I didn't want to be sent home in disgrace. On reflection, I felt that this element of danger had been exhilarating, and I really had loved it. I believe the students, surely the most knowledgeable of them, saw the contrasts between American openness and the closed society in Syria. I didn't have to say it myself, but there it was, right there in print in their required texts. My effort was a small one, not to be exaggerated. The Student Baath Party, under orders from the government, wanted to prevent or at least minimize my influence on the students. Their efforts to trap me were constant. But they failed to find a way to send me home, and I fancied I remained a thorn under their saddles.

As I thought about my students, I found myself imagining what it was like to be a university

student in Syria. I remembered those who had come to my office, hoping to get me to say something against the government or Islam. They were caught in a vicious system. Except for "the snake," I had come to like these young men, and I laughed inwardly at their awkward attempts. Dictatorship encouraged the most devious and the most tractable, not the most talented, principled and thoughtful, who ultimately became the best-educated. As a result, the most competent were shunted aside, and the least able, intellectually and morally, prospered and advanced into leadership. Naturally, many of the best students wanted to come to the United States. Mel and I helped some of them enroll at U.S. universities. We were eager for them to develop their skills and return home to better Syria. But so many young people who studied abroad didn't return. How could you blame them? How did the nation's leaders imagine that in this way Syria could become an important country, contributing to the world's knowledge and to the good of all?

Somewhat to my surprise, as I reflected on working at the university, I came to realize the difficult and delicate positions of the administrators who had often frustrated me. Perhaps I should sympathize with them more than I had. Dr. Ibrahim told me everyone in the university served two masters, their academic superiors and the Baath party. He really meant everyone: the department chairs, the deans, even the president. The English administrators had been educated in England, and all these men knew how a good university should function. But they also had to satisfy the political aims of those above them. All the professors had to be members of the Baath Party to keep their jobs, except Dr. Ibrahim, whose wife was a party member. In order to earn a living they often had to compromise their educational values to do the bidding of politicians. For one example, if the Baath Party didn't like a petition to improve the women's toilets, the faculty had to fail the woman who wrote it. How hard life must be, especially for our best friends on the faculty, those probably most idealistic about education! I had been insulated at least somewhat from such pressures, being an American guest and, luckily, having had "connections." Were I a Syrian professor without a general to back me, would I sacrifice my ideals and values to keep my job? I love teaching so much, and so I was forced to admit to myself that probably I too would cave in. Still I hoped I would find ways to resist.

I hope my associations with students and colleagues finally did them good. I have some reason to believe they did. Perhaps, I also was helpful to the many women I had the privilege to meet in Syria and in my travels. The more I saw, the more I was appalled by the condition of women in Syria and other Middle-Eastern countries. A combination of laws and religious customs enforces an ancient patriarchy that reduces female agency, relegating women to the status of property, almost livestock, penned in their homes and shepherded everywhere they go. Daughters are traded away, regardless of their wishes, to create and maintain alliances between families. While many invoke the Quran to lend religious support to this system, the Quran, like the Christian New Testament, actually resists to some extent the patriarchal traditions of the era in which it was written. The Quran specifies that *both* men and women should dress modestly. It says nothing about wearing a veil or the *hijab* or *burka*. Those restrictions predate the birth of Islam, reflecting the ancient customs of patriarchy, in which the father is more or less omnipotent in the extended family.

I wanted deeply to help the women I met to oppose this system. I learned that many of them wanted change. When I met such women, I let them know I supported them and would do whatever I could to help.

Still, on the whole, I remained circumspect with most people I met. I was at my most radical in the writing workshops I gave in Saudi Arabia. Surely, just meeting with a friendly and competent American woman who had become a professor was somewhat subversive. I shouldn't have been surprised by the suspicion and hostility of the Student Baath Party and of Syrian security agencies.

The Farewell Party

I was not surprised to learn from Dr. Hannah that Dr. Ibrahim did not intend to have a departmental farewell for me. Once she knew this, Dr. Hannah quickly set out on her own to organize a farewell party at the university. She invited many faculty, perhaps the entire English faculty. Even after two years, there were so many political and social undercurrents at the university that I didn't understand, and I doubted that many faculty would choose to attend without an invitation from Dr. Ibrahim. So, I was surprised to see so many. Even Dr. Ibrahim showed up. Dr. Hannah had procured a cake from the French bakery, the most fashionable in Aleppo, more famous for their artistic decorative icing than for the quality of their cake. A number of colleagues spoke, and Dr. Ibrahim managed to say good things about my teaching.

I felt obligated to make some brief remarks. I had planned to resist the temptation just to say I had had a wonderful time teaching at the University of Aleppo. The work had been very hard, and I had not had support from the administration. Rather administrators had often interfered and made my tasks harder. However, as my colleagues praised my work, I found myself

close to tears. I thanked all of them and said my two years at the university were highlights of my career. That was true in many ways, though perhaps not exactly as they probably understood. I was referring not just to the university, but to my entire experience of living in Syria: becoming acquainted with local cultures, seeing people at work and play, especially coming to appreciate their crafts, learning about regional history and seeing the ancient ruins and artifacts, and most of all, making friends with so many wonderful people — students, colleagues, and many others outside the university. Even the darker sides of that experience were interesting, and I was on the whole pleased with how Mel and I had navigated getting along under a dictatorship. Syria had changed us for the better. I *had* become Ann of Aleppo, though not as I had first imagined her.

Of course, I did not become the Ann of Aleppo I had naively dreamed of being — a sort of Orientalist hero from the West bringing light and liberation to the benighted East. I knew such visions were foolish and politically suspect even as I indulged them. Really, I had brought Mel and myself to Syria to give and to receive friendship, service, caring, and understanding. I know I could have done better, but I am content, just the same, to have become a better Ann of Iowa by living and working for a season in Aleppo. I hope that the seeds of resistance to oppression that I planted eventually bore some fruit. I believe that at least some of my students, colleagues and friends were the better for having come to know me. More than anything else, this is what the Fulbright program is meant to accomplish.